Stellaris: Grand Finale of the Mightiest

(First Edition)

by

Tian Wu

All empires fall eventually.

.....

Or do they?

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Preface

This story began with a dream.

On April 7, 2026, I woke up with the memory of an ordinary man caught between an alien civilization, an ancient empire, and a future that seemed to have claimed him before he understood who he was. The dream was strange, vivid, and largely absurd. Yet beneath its spectacle lay a question that stayed with me long after waking: if history, prophecy, family, and power all insist on telling us who we are, how much of the self remains truly our own?

Stellaris: Grand Finale of the Mightiest grew from that question. It brings together first contact, speculative history, political satire, black comedy, and the private bewilderment of a man who would much rather return to his ordinary life than become important to the fate of two civilizations. Its scale moves from an Atlanta backyard to the court of Qin dynasty, from a single marriage to an interstellar war. At its center, however, is not an emperor or an empire, but a person struggling to retain ownership of his life.

The historical figures and events appearing in this novel have been freely reimagined for the purposes of fiction. The Shearynns, their language, their institutions, and the cosmology surrounding them are likewise products of imagination. Although the title shares a word with the

name of a popular video game, this story is not based on, adapted from, or connected with that game.

This is a work that takes its ideas seriously without always taking itself seriously. I hope you readers will accept both sides of it: the cosmic questions and the ridiculous accidents, the grief and the jokes, the grandeur of empires and the stubborn dignity of one very confused human being.

Thank you for entering this bizarre imaginary world of my dream.

In memory of and dedication to my grandfather Yun Liu.

Chapter I

Arrival

It all began on the day they arrived.

It was a rainy summer afternoon in Atlanta, and I had already finished everything I had to finish at work on that day. The only task remaining was to wait until six o'clock without looking too obviously like someone waiting for six o'clock.

I sat at my desk, scrolling through my phone and occasionally touching the computer mouse so that the screen would not go dark.

A colleague beside me tapped my left shoulder and held out his phone.

The headline read:

> **BREAKING NEWS: UNKNOWN EXTRATERRESTRIAL OBJECT ENTERING EARTH ORBIT**

I looked at it for maybe two seconds.

"Meteor." I said.

"It says extraterrestrial object." My colleague emphasized.

"Everything in outer space is an extraterrestrial object if the headline writer needs clicks." I argued.

I returned to my phone. My colleague opened the live broadcast anyway, and the voice of a news anchor rose between our desks.

"The Space Agency is closely monitoring the unidentified object. Scientists have now confirmed that it is an artificial structure of extraterrestrial origin. Global authorities are urging the public not to display hostility toward the alien visitors. The United Nations General Assembly has called an emergency meeting to coordinate official countermeasures and prepare for first contact."

That got my attention. I had heard state media describe many things as emergencies. I had never heard them use the words "extraterrestrial origin" without immediately cutting to a documentary, a movie trailer, or a man explaining why a blurry light was probably Venus.

Around the office, people began to turn on the same broadcast. Conversations stopped. For several minutes, every screen showed a distant image of something enormous and dark moving against the stars.

Then six o'clock arrived. Whatever else had entered Earth orbit, my workday was over. So I packed my bag, left the office, and headed home.

The sky looked appropriately apocalyptic. Heavy clouds pressed low over the city. Rain fell in sheets, and thunder rolled somewhere beyond the skyline. My car became trapped in traffic on the expressway almost immediately. Water drummed against the windshield while the wipers pushed it aside and received more in return. I kept one foot near the brake, gently touched the accelerator whenever the line moved, and listened to the radio coverage with more than half of my attention.

"We have received an unconfirmed report from the International Space Station." The reporter said. Her professional calm had developed a visible crack.

"According to one astronaut, the larger extraterrestrial structure has released a dozen of smaller objects. These may be probes intended to survey our planet." The reporter continued.

"Probes? Could be bombs." I mumbled to myself. I meant it as a joke. Unfortunately, it was also a reasonable possibility.

The smaller objects spread through low-Earth orbit with impossible speed. Live diagrams showed them taking positions around the planet. Then green, laser-like rays emerged among them, each object connecting to five others until the entire globe sat inside a regular icosahedron[1].

The clouds above Atlanta brightened. A thin green line appeared across the cars ahead of me and stretched toward the horizon. I leaned forward over the steering wheel. Through the rain, I could see other lines intersecting high above the city, fragments of a geometric web large enough to enclose the whole world.

Traffic stopped completely. People got off their vehicles and stepped into the rain. Some raised their phones. Others simply stared upward, apparently deciding that being struck by a distracted driver was an acceptable price to pay for witnessing humanity's first contact with extraterrestrial intelligence.

The green projections on the ground began to move. It swept across the line of cars, crossed my windshield, and vanished behind me so quickly that my eyes could not follow it. The structure in orbit remained fixed.

[1] A convex polyhedron with twenty equilateral triangular faces, thirty edges, and twelve vertices.

Only its shadow — or scan, or message, or whatever it was — moved across the surface of the Earth.

Within minutes, videos of this incident were uploaded from every continent. A green line crossed a market in Lagos, a train platform in Tokyo, a beach in Brazil, and an ice field in Antarctica.

Commentators offered explanations faster than evidence could disprove them: the aliens were scanning us; they were mapping our cities; they were delivering a message; they were marking targets.

"Who knows what the hell they're doing?" I muttered. "My life stays the same. Eat, work, sleep, repeat." At that moment, I believed it. I was so numb and dumb.

I eventually got home and ordered dinner as usual: tomato-and-egg noodles with spicy cold beef shank. If civilization was about to end, at least I had chosen a delicious last meal.

After eating, I played video games while the television continued reporting in the background. I often left the news on when my wife was away. The voices made the room feel less empty, even when they were discussing the possible arrival of a technologically superior alien species.

By nightfall, the rain had stopped. I went into the backyard and looked up. Light pollution had erased more stars from Atlanta every year, but the green structure needed no dark sky. Its lines crossed above the clouds like the bars of a cage built around the only planet we had.

From time to time, the projected lines swept across the ground again. Noise drifted from the surrounding neighborhood. Some people cheered, some shouted in panic. Somewhere in the distance, a man appeared to be preaching through a loudspeaker. The arrival of extrater-

restrial intelligence had given everyone permission to become more intensely themselves.

Unlike most people, I remained calm. I did not know why. I was not normally calm. I worried about missed calls, ambiguous emails, unfamiliar social situations, and medical symptoms that doctors repeatedly assured me were harmless. Yet with an alien mothership in orbit and green laser beams wrapped around the Earth, I felt an unreasonable certainty that everything would be all right.

I laid back on a deck chair and closed my eyes. I had almost fallen asleep when one of the green projection lines touched my abdomen. At first, I thought it was another global sweep. Then the line stopped.

I opened my eyes. One of the green projection lines had settled directly across my body.

I jumped off the chair. The line moved with me.

I stepped left. It followed.

I stepped right. It corrected its position and remained centered on my abdomen.

"What the heck is happening?!" I wondered in shock.

Moments later, a second line approached from another direction and stopped across the first. Then a third arrived. Then a fourth. And so on.

More lines converged until twelve of them crossed at the exact place where I stood. Whenever I moved, the intersection moved with me. The cage around the Earth had selected a single point on its surface, and that point was me in my backyard.

I ran inside. The lines disappeared as soon as I crossed the door. Perhaps the roof blocked them, perhaps they had shifted to the roof shingles directly above my head. I did not climb outside to check.

"What the f**k?" I cursed. The words came out much louder than I intended.

That was the moment when I understood that I was in trouble. For reasons known only to the little gray men — assuming they were little, gray, or men — the alien visitors had noticed me, or chosen me.

You may reasonably ask why. I asked the same question.

I was not a president, a general, a billionaire, a religious leader, or a Nobel laureate. I was just a product manager at a solar-energy company, nothing about me and my life was ever extraordinary.

By day, I perform a tedious job in an ordinary office in Atlanta, Georgia. By night, I go home and spend time with my wife when she's not away, and occasionally worked on writing my science fiction novel.

Nothing about me justified the twelve extraterrestrial laser beams targeting at me.

I could not sleep. Each time I closed my eyes, I saw green lines converging across the darkness. I called my parents in China and made some small talk with them, but I did not tell them what happened to me that night. There is no natural place in a conversation with one's mother to say "By the way, an alien laser array may have locked onto me in the backyard."

At 2 a.m. in the morning, I finally took some sleeping pills. Fortunately, the next day was Saturday. I woke up late and opened my eyes to an ordinary blue sky. The green lines had vanished, although the mothership remained in orbit.

My wife was still abroad on a business trip. I called her and told her about the backyard incident. She listened quietly.

"Curtis, you were exhausted. Maybe you fell asleep outside. It could have been a dream. Or you were sleepwalking." She said at last.

I could not blame her. She already tolerated many of my shortcomings. I did not want to add "possible hallucination about alien targeting systems" to the list.

She returned home on Sunday. We went camping in the park, and for a little while our life resumed its usual shape. I buried the backyard incident as deeply as I could and tried to treat it as a nightmare. That strategy only worked for approximately one week.

The news then announced that an UN (United Nations) delegation had established humanity's first communication with an extraterrestrial intelligent species. Officials released almost no details. Linguists were still attempting to decipher the alien language, and every public statement seemed designed to prove that governments could use many words while saying nothing.

I tried again to forget about the green lines, yet I failed.

"Why me?" I asked myself.

The question repeated until I decided that perhaps someone else had experienced the same thing. I wrote an account of the backyard incident and posted it on Reddit, Quora, X, Instagram, and several other platforms.

The internet responded exactly as the internet responds. Some people called me a liar, others diagnosed me with several conditions after reading three paragraphs. A surprising number of viewers wanted to know

what drugs I had taken. One person even offered to remove the alien implant for a fee.

Nobody took me seriously. For the record, I was not crazy. At least, I was not clinically psychotic.

My wife persuaded me to stop reading the replies and let the incident fade into an unreal memory. I tried once more. Then the television spoke my name.

We were watching the evening news together. The anchors had just finished another vague report about the UN's attempts at communication when one of them stopped in the middle of a sentence.

Her face went still. She looked directly into the camera.

"You have been chosen, Curtis Liu. We know you are watching. Come to the light and face your true self, Your Majesty."

That was my full legal name. My wife heard it too. For several seconds, neither of us moved. Then the anchor blinked, glanced down at her notes, and continued as if nothing had happened.

The broadcast cut to a surveillance footage of the mothership. It resembled half of a purple sea urchin, with long structures curving from a dark central body and bands of light flashing along them like signals through nerves. On the side facing the surveillance satellite, holographic symbols had appeared.

They were not written in any known Earth language. They were written in mine.

Six years earlier, I had published a science fiction novel titled *Stellaris: Grand Finale of the Mightiest*. For that book, I had invented an alien

language called Shearynnese. I had printed a table of its circular glyphs (see Figure VI.1) and several translated examples in the appendix.

The symbols on the mothership were Shearynnese glyphs laid out linearly, I recognized them almost instantly. I ran to my study, pulled out my novel from the bookshelf, and turned the page to the appendix.

My wife followed behind me. We compared the image on the TV with the table in the appendix and the notes I had kept while designing the alien language.

Shearynnese did not correspond letter by letter with English or any other alphabetic language on Earth. I had never developed a complete public grammar. The book only contained several sample sentences, although my private notes went further.

Not far enough, I thought. Then I began reading the message, and its meaning emerged with disturbing ease.

My wife watched my face. "Who are you?" She asked. Her voice trembled. "Is there something special about you that you never told me?" She continued questioning me.

"Not that I know of." I answered with confidence. I reached for her, but she stepped away.

"Can you translate it?" She asked in doubt and confusion.

I matched the projected glyphs to the examples and notes. Part of me was performing a linguistic analysis, another part already knew what the symbols meant.

I translated aloud: "Deep within your subconscious dwells the remanence[2] of our future emperor — Shyeyain XIX[3]. Five centuries from now, we will require Your Majesty's aid to save the empire standing on the brink of collapse and annihilation, and to save our species from total extinction."

"You have got to be kidding. Is this some kind of terrible prank?" My wife stared at me.

"No. You know I don't do pranks. I hate pranks." I explained.

"Then call your parents. If there is something unusual about you, maybe they never told you." She did have a point.

My parents lived in China, my home country. They had not seen the broadcast we watched in the United States, and neither of them spoke English. I tried to explain everything to them over WeChat.

My mother listened, frowned, and concluded that I had spent too much time thinking about my novel. She told my wife to keep me away from the study for a while.

Under normal circumstances, this would have been a reasonable parental response. However, these were not normal circumstances.

My wife had heard the anchor say my name. The entire country had heard it. The symbols from my book remained visible on every news channel. Whatever was happening could no longer be dismissed as a private hallucination.

Soon the internet asked a new question: "Who is Curtis Liu?"

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[2] In physics, *remanence* describes the magnetization that remains in a ferromagnetic material after an external magnetic field is removed. Here, the term refers metaphorically to the nonphysical spiritual relic of a Shearynn emperor.

[3] The Roman numeral denotes Shyeyain the Nineteenth.

The hashtag `#FindingCurtisLiu` spread across several social media platforms. People compared public records, professional profiles, old photographs, and every person named Curtis Liu they've met before.

Only then did I realize what my earlier posts had done. I deleted them immediately, but it was already too late.

One night, I had a dream so vivid that I woke up with severe chest pain and the certainty that I had seen my own future. I could not remember every image. I remembered black vehicles, a windowless room, a needle, green lights, and the sense that danger was already moving toward me.

I decided that my wife had to leave. I persuaded her to stay with my parents in China for a while. She did not get along with them particularly well, but awkward family dinners were safer than interrogation by men in black.

At the international departure hall, she held my hands.

"It's only a precaution." I said.

"Take some time off. Besides, my parents love you." I added.

"Promise me you'll be fine." She looked into my eyes and began to cry.

"I promise I'll be fine. Go enjoy some time back home. Whatever trouble I bring, it won't reach you there." I tried to console her.

I did not know whether what I promised her was true. I said it because she needed to hear it and because I needed to believe in it.

She walked toward the security checkpoint and looked back twice. I watched until she disappeared into the crowd.

"Everything will be all right, we will see each other again in a few months." I told myself. My heart continued pounding as if it knew I was lying.

Airfare had become absurdly expensive after the mothership arrived, especially on intercontinental routes. Perhaps people feared that the aliens would shoot down airplanes, or perhaps everyone simply wanted to be somewhere else when the whole world changed.

I drove home without appetite. I slept badly, I couldn't concentrating at work, and eventually I had to ask my boss for an extended leave.

For several days, I did almost nothing. I sat in my house, stared through windows, and waited for my mind to solve a problem it did not even understand.

Then I began writing again, not the novel with Shearynnese, but a new book. I had no real plot and very little inspiration. Writing gave my hands something to do while my brain failed to produce answers.

I also returned to the park where my wife and I used to camp. Beneath a large oak tree, I tried to determine what quality of mine might have made me interesting to an extraterrestrial civilization. So I made a list:

1. I don't eat coriander, cilantro, or parsley. Roughly 15% of the global population shared at least part of that preference, so it seemed unlikely to be of decisive significance.

2. My ring fingers were unusually long. I could not imagine why an alien civilization would care about this.

3. An accident several years earlier had left me infertile. I don't know why I even include this in the list, except that popular culture had taught me to associate aliens with invasive medical

examinations. Perhaps infertility made their work more convenient. Even then, I was hardly the only infertile human on Earth.

4. I experienced recurring chest pain with no identified cause. I had visited doctors many times, and none of them had found a condition that could explain it. The message had said that a remanence lived deep within my subconscious. Perhaps the "future emperor" was less like a soul and more like an alien parasite.

5. I had felt no anxiety or hostility when the aliens arrived. This is probably the most abnormal feature of mine.

The last point disturbed me the most because I was actually known to be emotionally sensitive. Earlier in my life, I had been so socially anxious that beginning a conversation with a stranger felt almost impossible.

Yet while the rest of the world panicked, celebrated, prayed, rioted, and bought expensive plane tickets, I had continued my routine as if the visitors were delayed weather.

Perhaps some part of me had recognized them, perhaps some part of me had been waiting.

That's it. I'm done with it. Why don't they just beam me up? Why don't they pull their parasitic emperor out of my chest with a tractor beam and leave me alone?

I closed my notebook and complained in vain. The oak tree at the park offered no answer. It just stood there, literally a stupid piece of wood.

Ahhhhh! I hate this!

Chapter II

Men in Black

Two weeks after my wife left, danger found me. I had expected it, but that did not make its arrival more convenient.

One night, I was lying on the sofa with the TV on. The news had finally stopped staring at the alien mothership every hour of the day. The public diverted their attention back to the usual stuff: trivial matters like celebrity gossip, politician scandals, and sports.

I was almost asleep when sirens sounded outside my house. They grew louder and louder in time.

Even in a crisis, part of my brain took time to appreciate the Doppler effect. The change in pitch confirmed that the vehicles were approaching.

They were coming for me!

I quickly became fully awake, grabbed my keys and backpack, and moved toward the rear of the house.

Moments later, a man's voice struck the front door: "Homeland Security! Open up!"

Through the peephole, I saw several agents in black suits. A black SUV sat in my driveway, apparently serving as the official vehicle of people who did not want to be mistaken for anyone except secret agents. Their faces looked very serious.

To be honest, I was surprised it had taken them this long. I had known that leaving the country with my wife would only make it easier for them to classify me as a criminal fugitive. I had remained in Atlanta because I assumed the authorities would hunt me down wherever I go. Still, when the men in black appeared at my front door, reason gave way to instinct. And my instinct said: run, as fast as you can.

I slipped through the backyard gate, crossed my neighbor's yard, and reached the street on the other side. Several days earlier, I had parked my wife's spare car there for this moment.

At the same time, I opened an app on my phone and activated the holographic projector inside my house. A life-sized image of me appeared near the front door.

The technology was intended for home entertainment and remote meetings, not obstruction of federal law enforcement. Fortunately, the entrance was dim, and the projection looked convincing enough at a glance.

The holographic me told the officers to enter as I opened the door remotely with my cell phone, and he peacefully accepted the arrest while the physical me started the spare car.

One agent placed handcuffs around my holographic wrists that did not exist.

"Where is your family?" Another agent asked.

"Why don't you ask the ETs and find out?" The recorded image followed the response sequence I had programmed.

"I mean, do you have anyone who needs care? Children? Elders? We may be taking you away for quite a while." The agent explained.

"No." The holographic me answered calmly.

By then, the first agent had noticed that her handcuffs were closing through light. They knew they've been played, so they rushed back to the SUV and began searching for the physical me.

I reached the highway before their drones found my car. What followed was the least dignified high-speed chase in the history of first contact. Dozens of black vehicles joined the pursuit along the Interstate 75.

Unfortunately, I was not an experienced driver, and fear did not improve my driving skills. Within minutes, one of the federal vehicles struck the rear side of my wife's spare car and forced it toward the curb.

The car spun, hit the barrier, and stopped. Agents pulled me through the damaged door. They twisted my physical arms behind my back, cuffed my physical wrists, and covered my physical head with a black hood. Earplugs blocked the remaining sound. In seconds, the world had been reduced to fabric, pressure, and the smell of my own panic.

They placed me inside an SUV as if I were a violent criminal. Perhaps resisting arrest with a hologram and leading federal agents in a car-chase down the I-75 highway qualified that.

Soon after the vehicle began moving, I fell asleep. It was not voluntary. I had suffered from insomnia for years, sudden peaceful sleep inside a

federal transport vehicle was not one of my natural abilities. I assumed the hood had been treated with some kind of sedative.

When I woke up again, the cuffs and hood were gone. I sat on a comfortable sofa in a windowless office. The lighting was unusually dim, as though the room belonged to someone with very sensitive eyes. Across a desk sat a middle-aged black male.

"Mr. Liu, we require your cooperation. Help us understand what happened with you and the aliens." He spoke to me politely.

The scene was not the interrogation I had expected. There was no forced confession, no truth serum, and no enormously strong Russian man assigned to frighten me. The officer sitting across the desk from me looked almost kind and harmless. Almost.

"Tell me how they contacted you. And why they chose you?" He asked me in a peaceful voice.

However, something about his voice still sounded weird. The rhythm was human, but the effort behind it was too deliberate, as though he had learned speech from diagrams.

I described the backyard incident in detail, the converging green lines, and the television message. It was essentially the same story I had posted online and later deleted.

When I finished my statement, he remained silent.

I studied his face. His pupils were vertical. The sclera around them was not white but a faint, cloudy gray.

"You're with them, aren't you? You're a lizard man." I said to the officer.

"Yes, I am what you humans call a lizard man. But no, I am not with them. Four extraterrestrial intelligent species are currently present on planet Earth. The species that contacted you is one of the other three. They are humanoid beings like us and allegedly originate from the star system that humans call ζ Reticuli. They are very mysterious beings, none of the other three alien races nor any humans have ever made physical contact with them in recorded history. We don't even know how they call themselves." He did not deny it. Instead, he filled me in with some information that I'm pretty sure should be top-secret.

It's only been a few weeks since the first contact, and I already found out that the conspiracy theorists had underestimated the number of aliens visiting the Earth.

"Where the hell did you come from then?" I asked the lizard man officer sarcastically.

"Cut the nonsense. They never contacted you in person? Not even approached you in person through a representative?" He got a little irritated, and his vertical pupils narrowed.

"No. There were only the green lights and the message on TV. Nothing physical. I am very certain that I would remember meeting an alien representative." I answered with confidence, even though where did my confidence and calmness come from.

"They want something from you. There is something about you that they consider valuable." The lizard man officer explained to me.

A human officer entered the office and placed a copy of my novel on the desk, he seemed to be the assistant for the lizard man officer.

"You wrote this?" The lizard man officer rested one hand on the cover and asked.

"Yes. I wrote it in graduate school. It was just for fun, I published it six years ago." I answered.

"We know the publication details. But do tell us how you 'created' this language." The lizard man officer made his intention clear. Interestingly, he raised two fingers when he said the word "created", it was a informal gesture to resemble the double quotation marks.

"I made it up. The symbols just appeared in my head. I never intended to build a complete language, so I didn't work out every linguistic detail." I confessed.

"Why have you published nothing since then?" The lizard man officer wondered.

"I graduated from college, found a job, got married. Life became busier, and inspiration faded." I explained.

Then the lizard man officer turned the page to the appendix and said: "This is the exact same written language they're using now to contact the Earth. The United Nations has made repeated attempts to communicate with them, but their replies remain largely incomprehensible. Linguists have confirmed that Shearynnese behaves like a genuine language, its word frequencies satisfy Zipf's law. Your book gave them a beginning, but a handful of translated examples is not enough."

"I kept notes while I was designing it." I added.

"We already reviewed the notes. They are not enough either. Our analyses indicate that you know far more about Shearynnese than you wrote down. What are you hiding? Their fleet is in orbit. They may be declaring war, but we do not understand what the hell they are saying." The human officer stepped forward and urged me to tell them all the truth, he seemed a bit impatient.

"I'm not hiding anything." I argued.

"Then why does their language first appeared in your book long before they arrived?" The lizard man officer argued back. He did make a point.

"If I knew that, I wouldn't have led your agents down the interstate." I joked, and it seemed to have provoked the human assistant. I guess he was among the agents that car-chased me on the highway.

"Calm down, Sergeant." The lizard man officer said to his human assistant.

The lizard man officer rolled his eyelids in a movement no human could have performed. The effect ruined the good-cop, bad-cop routine by reminding me that one of the cops was a reptile. They were both bad cops at some level.

"Mr. Liu, you may know more than you can consciously recall. We need to examine your subconscious memory under hypnosis." He continued.

Without my approval of the hypnosis procedure, a lizard woman doctor entered the office. She led me into a medical room filled with instruments, several of which had clearly not been manufactured by any human technology. The lizard man officer and his human assistant moved into an observation room behind a one-way partition mirror.

I had seen no windows in this facility since waking up. There was no natural light source and no sense of depth beneath the building. I assumed the facility was underground, perhaps at a place like Area 51.

The lizard woman doctor placed me in an examination chair and tilted it backward.

"Look at the screen." She said.

Colored patterns unfolded across the screen. They twisted, separated, and recombined in shapes that seemed to continue behind my eyes. My thoughts slowed, and the room moved farther away.

Then the visions began. They were vague, disconnected, and impossibly old. I could not determine whether they were memories, dreams, or images suggested by the machine. I saw a dark sun, a chamber filled with purple light, a crown unlike any human crown, and a presence carried across a distance that was not entirely spatial.

All I could do was to describe what rose from my subconscious and hope the lizard people believed me.

"When the first Shearynn emperor of the present ruling house — Shyeyain the Mightiest — died twenty-two centuries ago, he left behind a soul-like spiritual relic called the '*Monarchic Remanence*'." I said slowly.

"Following the late emperor's dying wish, the royal high priest brought the monarchic remanence to the ancient Earth, and embedded it inside one of the most powerful human ruler at that time — emperor Ying Zheng[1], the first emperor of ancient China. From him, the remanence passed on fro generations through the purest line of his descendants." I continued narrating.

Then the screen brightened, and my chest tightened.

"And now it is inside me." I paused my statement here. That was what I saw in the hypnosis vision.

"Does this match the preliminary projections?" The lizard man officer spoke through the observation-room intercom.

[1]Ying Zheng later became known as Qin Shi Huang (direct translation: the first emperor of Qin dynasty) after assuming the imperial title in 221 BC.

"Mostly. His neural response is consistent. I do not believe he is lying." The lizard woman doctor confirmed after examining a second screen.

The display beside her was not merely recording brain activity. It was mapping fragments of the images in my mind.

"Keep talking, Mr. Liu." The lizard man officer said.

"They came because I carry the monarchic remanence. It was supposed to be passed on through my bloodline, but I was made infertile after an accident several years ago. So not the remanence will end with me if they don't take care of it." I continued.

The lizard man officer was quiet for a moment.

"That explains their urgency. They want you to understand what you are carrying, it's the fate of their civilization. I believe they have invited you to meet them." He said after giving it a moment of thought.

"What? They've never said 'Come and meet us.' to me, I would remember that part if they have." I was confused.

The doctor turned her screen toward me and indicated a repeating wave pattern buried beneath the other signals: "This is the invitation message."

"I never saw it in my visions." I insisted.

"It was not sent to your conscious mind, it was sent to the remanence. Your acceptance must be voluntary before the invitation becomes valid." The lizard man officer explained.

"How am I supposed to RSVP to something I can't perceive?" I asked.

"You cannot. You must wake up the remanence, then it will decide whether to accept or reject the invitation." The lizard man officer explained further. The pronoun chilled me more than the room.

"This bunker is unsuitable for such an awakening. We must send you off-world." He stood up, blinked sideways at the lizard woman doctor and walked out.

His human assistant made a small hand gesture, then the lizard woman doctor picked up an injector.

"Wait, what do you mean 'off-world'?!" I pulled against the chair and panicked.

"Where are you sending me? Hey! Answer me!" I screamed desperately.

Despite my intense resistance, the anesthetic still entered my arm. The room vanished from my sight almost immediately. When I woke up again, I was strapped inside a van.

The vehicle was traveling towards the launch facilities at Cape Canaveral. I learned the destination from the fragments of conversation around me and from the road signs visible through the front windshield. Heavy restraints crossed my chest, waist, wrists, and ankles.

"He's awake, give him another shot." Someone said behind me when I tried to sit up.

A human doctor prepared a disposable syringe. Apparently, the plan was to place me aboard a rocket ship while I remained in an induced coma. This struck me as a significant medical and diplomatic decision to make without asking the patient.

As the doctor approached, I struggled until the restraints cut into my wrists. He steadied my arm and pressed the needle against my skin. It

stopped, the metal point bent slightly but did not enter my body. He adjusted the angle and tried again, the needle again failed to penetrate my skin.

"What the hell?" The doctor said in awe.

He squeezed my arm. It was as weak and soft as ever. Then he pushed the needle hard with both hands. My skin still rejected it.

The human officer rose from the seat behind me.

"What's going on?" He asked the doctor.

"His skin is impenetrable." The doctor said in shock, obviously he had never seen something like this.

The human officer took the syringe and drove it down against my arm. The needle snapped sideways, then green light spread beneath my skin. For an instant, a fluorescent halo outlined my body.

Moments later, I disappeared from the van. From my perspective, there was no tunnel, no movement, and no sensation of crossing any space. One moment I was strapped inside a federal vehicle, the next I was sitting in a warm, softly lit room I had never seen before.

Only much later did I realize what happened on the road after I vanished.

"Code red! Stop the vehicle!" The human officer shouted.

The entire convoy halted on the isolated road between the Merritt Island and Cape Canaveral. Dozens of agents established a perimeter around the van that carried me. They searched the van, the roadway, the surrounding ground, and even the underside of the vehicles. Scanners found no trace of me or anything that took me away.

At last, the officer stood, switched off his flashlight, and announced the conclusion in precise federal terminology: "They beamed him up, motherf**kers!"

Cape Canaveral went into total lockdown. My disappearance was reported to the White House, and the president ordered a nationwide search for my whereabouts — not entirely for my sake, I later suspected, but for the sake of avoiding an incident with the aliens.

"Sir, it appears that Mr. Liu was teleported by the aliens." The lizard man officer received a call at the underground facility.

"Odd, nobody knew they could do that. It seems like they are far more advanced than we thought." The lizard man officer reacted, then he hung up the call.

The Shearynns[2] transmitted a message stating that I was safe aboard their mothership. However, human linguists failed to understand it, they were still unable to decipher most of the Shearynnese language even with the help from my notes.

The United Nations decided that they could not risk further inaction. Astronauts aboard the International Space Station (ISS) were ordered to approach the mothership in the space shuttle *Enterprise* and attempt humanity's first physical contact with the alien visitors.

Around the world, governments moved into a level of tension they did not publicly admit. The truth about the monarchic remanence remained classified. To the public, the story was simpler and stranger: Curtis Liu, humanity's first "interstellar ambassador" had disappeared while being escorted to a launch site.

At the time, I knew none of this. I did not even know where I was.

[2] From now on, this is officially what we are calling the alien visitors.

Chapter III

Close Encounters of the Third Kind

"Aaaah!" I screamed. It was not an intelligent response to teleportation, but it was the only one available to me at the moment.

The federal van had vanished. I was placed in a room with curved walls, warm light, and furniture designed by someone who had studied human interiors without fully understanding why humans arranged them that way.

A structure resembling a sofa stood against one wall. The air was comfortable. Nothing appeared immediately dangerous except the vacuum space outside the window. I remained unconvinced.

Two entities entered. I hesitate to call them creatures, because the word suggests something with skin, organs, or at least a physical body. These beings, however, looked like upright masses of fog. Gray vapor folded through itself while faint colors moved inside them. They did not resemble any human definition of life.

One of them dimmed the room as they entered. Perhaps they were sensitive to light. Perhaps they feared being vaporized, although from my perspective vaporization appeared to have happened already.

The room had clearly been prepared for me. The atmosphere, the temperature, and the sofa-like object were all approximately human-style. They were probably prepared for me since these "fog folks"[1] themselves had no reason to sit or lie down.

A holographic display appeared in mid-air and displayed Shearynnese glyphs in front of me. I immediately understood why those linguists on Earth all failed to decipher this alien language.

The messages projected outside the mothership had arranged the Shearynnese glyphs in a linear order, imitating the form I had used in my novel (and the form of writing that humans are most used to). That version was an accommodation, not the natural written structure of the Shearynnese language.

True Shearynnese was written in a three-dimensional format: circular glyphs gather up with a shared central axis, with their strokes overlap at different depths and tilted at precise angles relative to one another.

A change in rotation would alter the meaning, a mark hidden from one direction became visible from another. What looked like a single character was an object composed of several simultaneous grammatical relations.

Human letters move through space in a linear order, one symbol after another. On the other hand, Shearynnese glyphs assemble meaning around a common center and with various tilting angles.

I had never consciously invented that system, nor have I learned how to read it. But somehow, I could read it. I just could.

[1] This is the official nickname I picked for the Shearynns.

The fog folks did not speak. They had no mouths, lungs, or vocal cords. Colored light sometimes moved through one body, followed by a response in the other. I assumed they communicated telepathically or by some method that would sound like telepathy until some scientist give it a fancier name.

The fog folks addressed me through the hologram: "Welcome aboard the *Truthful World*[2]. His Majesty is awakening within you. The ritual must continue so that the return may be completed."

"What ritual? How did I get here? Why did you kidnap me?" I panicked.

The fog folks gave me no reply. One of them indicated a device rising from the floor. Its surface resembled a large drop of watery dough, or a polished bead of liquid that held its shape without a container. It appeared to be a keyboard[3].

They did not understand the spoken language of humans. If I wanted answers, I had to type my questions in Shearynnese.

I placed my hands near the liquid marble. I had no idea what to do. I didn't know how to operate this device.

When I thought about what I want to convey in my mind, somehow my fingers moved on themselves. The liquid marble material divided beneath my fingers, then rings formed, rotated, and sank into one another. A complete Shearynnese sentence was assembled above the device.

I guess someone inside me knew how to use it. By "someone", I mean Shyeyain XIX, the future emperor supposedly living in my subconscious.

[2] Apparently, this is the name of the Shearynn mothership.

[3] In private, I call this device "the liquid marble."

Soon, the fog folks' reply appeared on the hologram: "To complete the ritual of His Majesty's return, you must recollect your origin."

Great, another riddle. I spread my arms.

"Fine. Do whatever you came to do." I told them.

I wanted them to take what they came for and return me back to Earth as soon as possible. I hope they would be nice and leave me alone if I cooperate. At this point, cooperation seemed safer and more efficient than being anesthetized by an alien species that might not know much about human physiology. After all, they could not read my medical record.

The fog folks began adjusting the room around me. "You must participate willingly. The ritual requires consent from both the conscious and subconscious mind." They emphasized.

Apparently, the aliens who abducted me had strict procedural standards regarding voluntary participation.

At that same time, the space shuttle *Enterprise* was approaching from the International Space Station on behalf of the United Nations and, by extension, all mankind.

I did not yet know about the mission until I saw the space shuttle approaching the *Truthful World* through the window in my room.

It was not a window in the ordinary sense. There was no glass and no visible frame. It's actually more like a section of the exterior hull that simply changed from opaque material to a one-way transparent surface, as though electrical stimulation had persuaded the metal to stop being a wall.

Outside, our beautiful planet Earth filled the distance. The *Enterprise* moved toward us. One of the fog folks indicated the approaching space shuttle.

"What is that?" The fog folks asked.

"A human spacecraft. They come in peace to make first contact with your civilization." I typed my reply using the liquid marble.

"Why?" They asked further. The question seemed sincere.

"Courtesy. They want to establish diplomatic relations with you." I explained further.

"No interest. No contact. No diplomacy. We told them already." The fog folks seemed disappointed.

The Shearynns had crossed whatever distance separated their civilization from ours, placed a geometric cage enclosing the Earth, addressed me by name on live television, and abducted me from federal custody. Beyond that, they preferred privacy.

"They cannot understand your messages. They have not deciphered your language. I can translate if you allow me to speak with them." I suggested.

The fog folks left the room. They returned about a minute later. I assumed they had consulted a superior officer, committee, priest, or whichever authority governed the diplomatic refusal on the *Truthful World*.

A communication channel opened. The astronauts on the *Enterprise* appeared in a holographic image. Their expressions changed when they saw me.

"This is Curtis Liu speaking from the alien mothership, they want you to back off. They only came for me and are not interested in establishing contact with other humans." I said on the call to the *Enterprise*.

I spoke with surprising calm, as if I had spent my life preparing to reject humanity's first diplomatic mission on behalf of the Shearynns.

The moment I finished, the Shearynns ended the transmission. The image disappeared before the astronauts could respond. Then the *Enterprise* vanished from the window.

"Where did they go? Did you attack the human spacecraft?" I asked panically.

"Remain calm. We are no longer within that spacetime. As part of the ritual, we have shifted to your origin." The fog folks answered through hologram.

I later learned that, from the perspective of the human astronauts, the opposite had happened. The mothership just disappeared out of a sudden while the entire world watched.

"What the hell?! Where did it go?" The mission commander said confusedly over the radio channel.

"It was there one second and gone the next!" Another astronaut replied.

Ground control asked whether the vessel had activated an optical cloak. However, the radar showed nothing. The *Enterprise* moved into the space the mothership had occupied and swept the area with its robotic arm. The arm touched only vacuum.

The *Truthful World*, with me inside it, had left the present spacetime.

I stared at the unchanged Earth outside our transparent wall and questioned in utter confusion: "Wait, do you mean time travel? When you say my origin, do you mean the year I was born?"

The answer unfolded into the longest message they had given me:

> *More than two millennia ago, our great emperor — Shyeyain the Mightiest — sent his monarchic remanence to your world and placed it within one of the greatest human leaders at that time.*
>
> *Your world serves as a backup of our civilization. We are intrinsically the same species, but we inhabit different universes. Because of this dimensional separation, our forms appear gaseous to you, resembling what human traditions call "ghosts" or "spirits". We chose not to assume human shapes, as such forms might cause you greater distress.*
>
> *Now back to the subject at hand, our royal high priest has received a warning message transmitted from the future. It foretells a future war against mankind and the infertility of the present remanence carrier.*
>
> *We must ensure that the monarchic remanence survives so that emperor Shyeyain XIX may return and preserve the Shearynn Empire during the human invasion five centuries from your present. Without His Majesty, the empire will fall and humans will drive our species to total extinction. The high priest has seen your fate.*

"Oh, dear lord! You have got to be f**king kidding me!" I exclaimed after reading the message twice.

"No. This is totally serious." The fog folks stated.

"The lizard people on Earth told me that you came from ζ Reticuli." I said (typed) to them playfully.

"Lizard people are idiots." The colors inside both fog bodies changed as they cursed the lizard people with some sort of alien racism. It was somewhat comforting to learn that interspecies prejudice had survived the development of time travel.

Meanwhile, in the present-day timeline, the sudden disappearance of the Shearynn mothership was reported to the whole world. The public responded with a mixture of disappointment and relief.

Humanity had spent centuries longing to meet higher beings and just as long imagining those beings would destroy the Earth. When the alien visitors actually vanished, both fantasies were denied at once. The aliens simply don't care.

I learned about that reaction much later. At the time, my own timeline had become more immediate.

The fog folks informed me that the *Truthful World* had secretly arrived at the low Earth Earth in the year 230 BC. They had brought me to witness "my origin": the time when they sent the monarchic remanence to my direct ancestor — emperor Ying Zheng.

Seeing through the "window" of the cloaked *Truthful World*, I saw another Shearynn vessel above ancient Earth. It was an older design shaped like a hexagram. From its center descended a cross-shaped landing module[4], it was moving towards east Asia.

The fog folks confessed that this was not the first time they visited the Earth. In earlier dynasties of Shearynn history, monarchs of other

[4] At that time, the Shearynns had not yet developed teleportation technology capable of transporting organic beings.

houses had also planted their remanences in powerful human hosts. However, each of their lineage had eventually hit a dead end.

Some missions had left more than failed bloodlines. Due to blunders caused by earlier visitors, some of the Shearynn symbols entered the totems and sacred imagery of human religions. Those symbols passed through human history for thousands of years, surviving long after those remanences had faded away.

After the briefing, the fog folks gave me clothing intended for ancient China and guided me toward a teleportation chamber. They told me to experience the journey and allow the monarchic remanence to find itself.

Their instructions did not answer the most obvious problem: "What about the grandfather paradox?"

One of the fog folks replied: "What's happened has happened. Casual barriers won't let you do anything that shouldn't be done, it's basic entropic dynamics."

Basic for them, perhaps. Then the other fog folk said: "The journey may require considerable time, but do not attempt to return early. The more urgently you struggle to escape, the longer history awaits."

"You need not fear the duration, we will help you regulate your emotional distress, and the remanence will take control over your own consciousness for most of the time." The fog folks added in attempt to relieve my anxiety.

"Most of the time?" I doubted. However, this time, the fog folks didn't give me further explanation.

Moments later, the teleportation chamber closed around me. Green lights rose from the floor. The fog folks activated the device before I could ask them anything else.

Within seconds, I was teleported to the surface of the ancient Earth, to East Asia in the late 3rd century BC. For me, it was the beginning of a brand new adventure. For the monarchic remanence inside me, it was a return.

Chapter IV

Total Recall

"What a living hell is this?!" I exclaimed as soon as I landed on ancient Earth after the time travel.

I was teleported to the capital city of ancient China (or "Qin" at the time) — Xianyang. The grand capital city smelled like rotten vegetables, horse manure, wet wood, human sweat, and possibly several dead animals hidden somewhere nearby.

To be fair, modern-day Atlanta did not always smell like roses either. But at least Atlanta had sewage pipes, and Xianyang did not.

The royal palace complex of Epang standing beyond the city wall was magnificent and breathtaking, although it was covered by a thin layer of dust and mud. I guess the reality of the ancient world is simply not as glamorous as it appeared in modern realizations.

The fog folks told me we had arrived in the year 230 BC. However, in my time, history books said that the Epang Palace had not been built

yet by this year. This is the problem with time travel. You think you know history until history starts fact-checking you in person.

It was the seventeenth year of the reign of king Ying Zheng of Qin. And the unification war of ancient China were about to begin.

I stood in a muddy alley wearing a dark robe prepared by the Shearynns. The robe was supposed to help me "blend into the local population". Unfortunately, it looked like something a low-budget television director would give to an actor playing "mysterious ancient wizard number three".

I also had no shoes. Well, technically I had shoes, but they were made of black material that did not exist anywhere on Earth at that time. The Shearynns had wrapped them in cloth, which made me look like I had two injured feet.

A dog barked at me from behind a wooden fence. "Hey, buddy, at least one of us knows where we are." I said to the dog, and the dog continued barking.

Then I heard the sound of bronze weapons and hurried footsteps. A patrol of Qin soldiers turned into the alley. They wore dark armor plates fastened together by cords, with crossbows hanging from their shoulders. Their uniforms were far less glamorous than the ones in historical dramas. Most of the armors were scratched, stained, repaired, or covered in mud.

"来者何人？/ *Who are you?*" The officer at the front pointed his spear at me and questioned.

Somehow I understood him perfectly. That was concerning. I had learned a little Classical Chinese in school, but not enough to understand the spoken language of the Warring States period. Yet his words entered my mind as naturally as modern Mandarin.

I guess the monarchic remanence was translating for me, or perhaps it was just remembering.

"吾乃远方之客，无兵无恶意。/ *I am a traveler from afar, I bear no arms and harbor no ill intent.*" I raised both hands and answered the officer. The sentence came out of my mouth before I had time to construct it consciously.

"远方何处？/ *Where afar exactly?*" The officer narrowed his eyes and continued questioning.

"天外。/ *Beyond the heaven.*" I said after looking up at the sky and thought about it for a moment. This is probably not the smartest possible answer.

"妖言惑众，缚之！/ *Heretical nonsense, seize him!*" The soldiers immediately surrounded me.

"Oh crap, should have just said Korea." I mumbled gently in English.

The soldiers tied my wrists behind my back and dragged me through the city. People stopped to look at me. Merchants, laborers, children, government clerks, farmers, etc. Everyone stared at the strange foreigner being escorted by armed soldiers.

Xianyang was larger than I expected. It was not merely a royal residence surrounded by primitive villages. It was a functioning administrative machine. Government offices lined the major roads. Wooden tablets were carried between compounds. Carts loaded with grain passed through guarded gates. Officials examined seals, weights, travel documents, and cargo records.

I had always imagined that I could impress ancient people by introducing basic organization of modern society. Apparently they didn't need it from a time traveler, they were already obsessed with paperwork.

I was taken to a local office, questioned three times, searched twice, and accused of being a spy from five different states.

They confiscated the small black object the Shearynns had placed inside my robe. I had assumed it was some sort of emergency communication device, but it looked like an ordinary polished stone.

An official struck it against the table. Nothing happened. He placed it near a flame. Again, nothing happened. Then he touched its center with one finger. The entire room turned green. Three-dimensional Shearynnese symbols unfolded above the table like rotating rings made of light.

Everyone in the room fell to the floor. One guard screamed: "天书！ / *Heavenly script!*"

The commanding official shouted: "速禀陛下！/ *Report to his majesty immediately!*"

That was how I avoided being executed as a spy. Instead, I was promoted to being detained as a supernatural threat. I am not certain whether that was an improvement.

I was brought into the palace after sunset. The halls were illuminated by oil lamps. The light trembled across dark pillars and bronze ornaments, making the entire palace look like it was breathing.

Officials stood silently along the walls. Armed guards watched every movement I made. At the far end of the hall sat the king of Qin — Ying Zheng, who was 29 years old (about the same age as me) at the time (before he proclaimed himself as emperor).

He did not look like the old tyrant from images in history books and television. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and physically energetic. His

face was sharp rather than fat, his beard still relatively short. His eyes were restless, observant, and deeply unpleasant to lie to.

Li Si, the imperial chancellor of Qin, stood a few steps below Ying Zheng. I recognized Li Si only after someone addressed him by name. He looked calmer than the king, but perhaps even more dangerous. Ying Zheng examined people like potential enemies. Li Si examined them like unfinished documents.

The black Shearynn device had been placed on a bronze tray between us. I knelt on the cold marble floor and greeted Ying Zheng: "微臣叩见始皇帝陛下。/ *Your humble subject pays homage to Your Majesty, the first emperor.*"

"尔言自天外来？/ *You claim to have come from beyond the heaven?*" Ying Zheng looked at me and asked.

"然。/ *Affirmative.*" I nodded, but these ancient people didn't seem to know what nodding one's head means.

"何以至秦？/ *Why did you come to Qin?*" Ying Zheng continued asking.

I hesitated. The answer was very complicated, no matter what language I use to phrase it.

"奉故主之命，寻其所寄。/ *Acting on the orders of my former master, I seek that which was entrusted to Your Majesty's care.*" I tried to express my thoughts in the simplest words possible.

Several officials exchanged confused looks. "故主何人？所寄何物？/ *Who's your former master? What have they entrusted to his majesty's care?*" Li Si stepped forward and questioned me.

I tried to say "Shyeyain the Mightiest" in ancient Chinese, but my mouth produced something closer to a dying goose.

Meanwhile, the black device suddenly activated. Green symbols appeared above the tray. They rotated slowly, forming a three-dimensional structure that nobody except me could read.

The message said:

ORIGINAL HOST IDENTIFIED,
COMMENCING REMANENCE TRANSFER.

"Oh no." I whispered.

The palace shook. High above in the sky above the palace, the cross-shaped landing module I saw earlier hovered in cloaked form and emitted a beam of green light from its center. The green light descended through the roof without damaging it, passing through the woods, stones, bronze, and human bodies as if none of them existed.

The green light directly struck Ying Zheng, then the king rose from his golden throne, but his body immediately became rigid. His fingers tightened around the edge of the table, and the oil lamps throughout the hall went out simultaneously.

The guards drew their swords.

"有刺客，护驾！ / *Assassins! Shield his majesty!*" The lead imperial guard yelled out loud.

I felt a violent pressure inside my chest. The same unexplained chest pain I had experienced throughout my life returned all at once, except now it felt as if an invisible hand had reached through my ribs and grabbed my heart.

Something inside me responded to something inside him. Images flashed across my mind: a purple sky, a city suspended above a gas giant, millions of lights curving along the interior of an alien world, a throne made of the same mysterious black material, and a tall figure whose face I could not see.

Then another image appeared: Ying Zheng standing alone on a battlefield covered in banners, hehind him were six broken crowns.

Moments later, the green light disappeared, and the oil lamps were reignited one by one.

Ying Zheng remained standing. For several seconds, he stared directly at me without speaking. Then he said trembling: "寡人似曾见过尔。/ *I think I've seen you before.*"

My blood went cold. "大王?/ *Your Majesty?*" Li Si and me both looked at Ying Zheng and doubted.

"尔名为何?/ *What's your name?*" Ying Zheng ignored him and asked me instead.

"臣姓刘名柯。/ *My name is Curtis Liu.*" I answered humbly. That was the closest ancient pronunciation I could produce for my modern name.

The king sat down slowly and questioned me further: "刘柯, 既为天外之人, 寡人问尔, 天下可一乎? / *Curtis Liu, since you came from beyond the heaven, I ask you, could the realm be unified as one?*"

I knew the answer. Everyone from my age knew the answer. Yet when I tried to say that Qin would conquer all six states and establish the first unified imperial dynasty, my throat closed.

No sound came out. The causal barriers worked. The fog folks had warned me that I would not be able to do anything that "shouldn't be done". Apparently, giving historical spoilers counted.

I tried another approach: "然。/ *Affirmative.*"

"何时可一？ / *When will it be unified as one?*" Ying Zheng leaned forward and stared at me curiously.

Again, my throat locked. I coughed violently. The king watched me struggle. Instead of becoming angry, he smiled: "天禁尔言乎？ / *Did the heaven forbid your spoiler words?*"

"然。/ *Affirmative.*" I confessed. It was much easier to just agree with him rather than to explain the entropic dynamics in detail.

"留之。/ *He shall stay.*" Ying Zheng turned to Li Si and ordered him to keep me by his side.

"诺。/ *As you wish.*" Li Si bowed.

The king looked at me again: "自今日起，居客卿之列，号曰'星客'。/ *From this day forth, you shall rank among the honored guests, bearing the title 'star guest'.*"

That was how I became an advisor to the king of Qin. Not because of my intelligence or my management experience, not even because I carried his bloodline (he didn't know about this at the time) and the remanence of an alien emperor.

I got the job because a glowing black rock caused the palace lights to go out. Honestly, I have seen worse hiring processes.

At first, I thought I would change history. I imagined myself introducing advanced mathematics, modern medicine, steam engines, gunpowder, democratic institutions, and perhaps indoor plumbing.

None of that happened. Like the fog folks said, what's happened has happened.

I don't know the ratio of gunpowder ingredients, I don't know how to build a steam machine from scratch, I can't even explain electricity to them with words other than some "magical flows of mini thunder".

I once spent an entire week attempting to draw the blueprint of a modern firearm, but I don't know what its interior structure looks like. I also tried to design a modern toilet, but I don't know how a modern toilet flushes itself.

I can't say whether this is due to the causal barriers or my own stupidity. I could not introduce anything that would significantly alter the historical trajectory leading to my own existence. What I could do was only to help improve things that already existed.

The Qin army did not need me to teach them the importance of discipline. Qin military laws were terrifyingly effective, they did not need me to introduce standardized weapons. Qin workshops already produced crossbow components according to official measurements, they did not need me to introduce industrialization and assembly line operations. Qin officials could turn the registration of a stolen cattle into six bamboo documents and a criminal investigation, they did not need me to explain bureaucracy.

What they lacked was knowledge that history had never bothered to record. I advised military camps to place latrines downstream from drinking water. That one suggestion saved more soldiers than any weapon I could have invented.

I explained that boiled water is cleaner and reduces illness, although I could not explain what is bacteria to them without feeling my tongue go numb. I recommended separating fever patients from the rest of the

camp. I introduced a crude system of marking medical cases according to urgency.

Li Si called it administrative classification, I called it triage. The Qin officials liked it once they realized it involved more records.

I also proposed dividing military maps into square grids and assigning each square a number. Qin cartographers already understood scaled maps, so the causal barrier allowed the idea to pass. The new system made it easier to coordinate troop movements and grain deliveries.

The generals cared less about where my knowledge came from once it began saving time and lives. On the other hand, the king cared about it since the beginning.

Ying Zheng summoned me privately every week. Sometimes he asked about war, sometimes he asked about government. Most of the time, he asked about the future: "后世尚有秦乎？ / *Does Qin still exist in the future?*"

Every time he asked me whether Qin still remained standing in the ages to come, I became physically incapable of answering.

"后世之辈如何论寡人？ / *How will future generations speak of me?*" Ying Zheng asked me one day. This question was even worse than the previous one.

My vision blurred, my chest tightened. One time, blood actually came out of my nose. Ying Zheng handed me a cloth and complained: "罢矣，天机吝啬。/ *Never mind, the heaven is stingy with its secrets.*"

Ying Zheng did not appear disappointed. In fact, he seemed amused. I gradually understood that he might be testing the barrier rather than questioning me. At some level, I think Ying Zheng already knew that I came from the future, I'm just not sure about how much he knew.

The first kingdom to fall was Han. Its conquest was efficient, almost administrative. There was no glorious final battle under a blood-red sunset. Qin forces advanced, defeated resistance, captured the king of Han, and converted the territory into a commandery. One kingdom disappeared from the map, five remained.

Soon, Zhao followed Han to fall. I accompanied a supply division rather than the main attack group. My official task was to inspect sanitation and grain distribution, while my unofficial task was to stand nearby whenever generals wanted the "star guest" to confirm their plans. However, this was rarely useful.

"星客以为，此道可行否？ / *In the star guest's opinion, would this course of attack be feasible?*" A general once asked me while pointing at a route on a map.

I stared at it, but I had no idea at all, so I told him: "将军久习兵事，臣不及也。/ *The general is long experienced in military affairs, a mastery to which I cannot lay claim.*" He interpreted this as profound humility, but it was actually complete honesty.

When the city of Handan fell, I saw prisoners walking in lines along the road. Some were soldiers, some were officials, and some were ordinary civilians who had lived on the wrong side of a border.

The history books described kingdoms being conquered in a few sentences. In person, every sentence contained thousands of souls. That was when the adventure stopped feeling like an adventure.

Ying Zheng was not a cartoon villain, he was not a misunderstood saint either. He believed division was the root of suffering, and therefore every act that ended division was justified.

He was building peace through conquest. The contradiction did not seem to bother him, but it bothered me.

"始皇帝陛下，天下既一，兵可息乎？/ *Your Majesty, the first emperor, now that the realm is unified, could the armies be laid to rest?*" I asked him after the fall of Zhao.

"未一，何以息兵？/ *Unification is not yet achieved, how could the armies be laid to rest?*" He looked over a map of the remaining states and argued.

"若一之后？/ *What about after unification is achieved?*" I clarified.

"则法一，度一，书一，车轨一。民无异政，诸侯无私兵，自可久安。/ *Then legal regulations, standard of measurements, font of the written scripts, and the gauge of carriage axles will be unified as well. With the people subject to a single system of governance and the feudal lords stripped of private armies, enduring stability will naturally be assured.*" Ying Zheng's answer was logical and wise. It was also almost exactly what history said he did.

Sometimes I wondered whether I was advising him, or merely adhering to events that had already happened.

The state of Yan attempted something more dramatic. Their crown prince sent an assassin named Jing Ke to assassinate Ying Zheng.

I knew the story, of course. Every Chinese knew it: a map concealing a dagger, a severed head offered as a gift, the assassin approached the king of Qin in the palace, and the king struggled to draw his long sword for self-defense. All of it.

I tried to warn Ying Zheng before the Yan delegation arrived, but I could only phrase my words vaguely: "燕使不可尽信。/ *The ambassador of Yan is not trustworthy.*"

"何故？/ *Why is that?*" Ying Zheng looked at me calmly.

The causal barrier tightened around my throat. I could not say Jing Ke's name, I could not mention the dagger, and I could not remind Ying Zheng about the map.

"臣..... 心不安。/ *I.....I'm badly worried.*" I stammered.

"寡人亦然。/ *Me too.*" Ying Zheng nodded, he accepted the audience anyway.

I stood near one of the pillars as Jing Ke entered the hall carrying the map. Qin Wuyang followed behind him but became visibly terrified before reaching the king.

The atmosphere changed. The monarchic remanence inside me began to burn.

Jing Ke presented the map, it unrolled, the dagger appeared. Everything happened faster than the versions shown in movies and history books.

Jing Ke grabbed Ying Zheng's sleeve and thrust the poisoned blade toward him. The king twisted away, his sleeve tore, and the dagger passed close to his chest.

Guards stood outside the hall because armed attendants were not permitted to approach the throne without command.

Officials scattered in fear. Ying Zheng attempted to draw his sword, but the weapon was too long to clear its scabbard.

I knew what came next. For once, the causal barrier allowed me to speak. "王负剑！ / *Carry the sword on Your Majesty's back!*" I shouted loudly.

Ying Zheng heard me, he shifted the scabbard, drew the blade, and struck Jing Ke across his leg. The assassin fell and threw the dagger, it struck a pillar on the side.

Moments later, the guards rushed into the hall and Jing Ke was killed immediately, while I stood frozen behind the pillar.

Ying Zheng's torn sleeve hung from his arm. Blood stained the edge of his robe, although the blade had barely touched him.

He looked at me. Not at the guards, not at the dead assassin, but at me: "尔又先知。/ *Again, you knew this in advance.*"

"臣仅知此事。/ *I knew only of this matter.*" I replied humbly, I was afraid that he would punish me for not reminding him in clear details.

That was a lie, and he somewhat knew it was a lie. But he did not expose or accuse me for it.

After that day, he stopped asking exactly when and where did I come from. Instead, he began asking about what kind of future could produce someone like me. That was much harder to answer, too hard for an inarticulate person like me.

A couple of years later, Wei fell when Qin diverted the river and flooded the capital city of Wei. I advised engineers about the flood, but I refused to visit the city afterward.

After Wei, it's Chu's turn. However, Chu was different, it's too large to be defeated quickly.

A young general named Li Xin promised victory with two hundred thousand soldiers, while the veteran Wang Jian insisted that he needed six hundred thousand.

Ying Zheng asked for my opinion. I knew what history recorded: Li Xin would fail, and Wang Jian would succeed. But simply repeating the known answer felt dishonest.

"王翦老而慎，李信锐而轻。灭楚非取一城，乃吞大国。臣以为，当从王翦。/ *Wang Jian is seasoned and prudent, whereas Li Xin is bold but rash. Conquering Chu is not a matter of taking a single city, but of swallowing a great power. In my view, we should follow Wang Jian's counsel.*" I suggested.

Well, Ying Zheng sent Li Xin anyway. Perhaps he wanted speed, perhaps he wanted to test my honesty, or perhaps history had already decided.

Li Xin's campaign ended in disaster. When the reports arrived, Ying Zheng read them without changing his facial expression. Then he personally traveled to Wang Jian's residence and asked the old general to return.

Wang Jian demanded six hundred thousand soldiers, that's almost the entire military strength of Qin. Before departing, he repeatedly requested land, houses, and wealth for his family. Some officials called him greedy, but I understood what he was doing. A general commanding six hundred thousand soldiers could easily be suspected of rebellion. By acting obsessed with property, Wang Jian was assuring the king that he wanted comfort and fortune, not the throne. Ying Zheng understood that too.

The greatest ruler and the greatest general of Qin trusted each other by pretending not to trust each other. As a result, Wang Jian destroyed Chu. Yan and the remaining Zhao resistance were eliminated afterwards. The only remaining enemy, Qi, surrendered to Qin in 221 BC.

For the first time in generations, there were no competing kings beneath the heaven, and the realm has been unified as one. When the news reached Xianyang, the city erupted. Bells sounded from the palace, soldiers shouted in the streets, and officials ran between govern-

ment compounds carrying documents that would reorganize millions of lives.

I stood on a palace terrace beside Ying Zheng. He was no longer merely the king of Qin, the old titles were insufficient. He combined the legendary titles of the three sovereigns and five emperors and created a new one — "皇帝/*Emperor*".

"自今以后，称始皇帝。后世以数计，二世、三世，以至万世。/ *From this day forward, I shall be known as the first emperor. Future generations shall be numbered — second emperor, third emperor, and so on, to thousands of generations.*" Ying Zheng declared at his accession ceremony.

From that day onward, he stopped calling himself "寡人/*I*", and replace with a specialized pronoun — "朕/*We*[1]".

"朕并天下，海内为郡县。此业如何？/ *We have unified the realm, and its entirety is now organized into commanderies and counties. How would you rate such achievements?*" The first emperor once asked for my advice on governing his empire.

I looked over the capital city Xianyang, and nodded: "彩，甚彩矣!/ *Marvelous, absolutely marvelous!*".

Nine years ago, or perhaps only moments ago from the Shearynns' perspective, I had been sitting at home eating tomato and egg noodles. Now I'm standing beside the first emperor of China, and one of the greatest leaders in human history.

"前无古人。/ *Such achievements are unprecedented in history.*" I added.

Ying Zheng smiled, and asked: "后有来者乎？/ *Will there be anyone who come after me to match it?*"

[1]Royal "We", the first-person pronoun of ancient monarchs.

The causal barrier struck me again. I said nothing. His smile faded, but only slightly. "朕知矣。/ *I understand.*" He sighed, turned around, and walked away with both hands behind his back.

Unification did not bring rest, it brought more work. Measurements had to be standardized, roads were to be rescaled, writing fonts were to be regulated. Commanderies required officials, seals, tax systems, criminal codes, warehouses, postal routes, and military garrisons.

Sometimes I wondered whether the emperor had conquered the six states merely to force everyone to fill out the same forms, write the same words, walk the same roads, and serve the same host.

My contribution became smaller after unification. The empire did not need an oracle after all. It needed administrators, engineers, accountants, judges, and millions of exhausted laborers.

I traveled with Ying Zheng during his imperial inspection tours. I saw mountains, rivers, newly built roads, old battlefields, and communities that did not yet think of themselves as belonging to the same nationality.

Some people praised the emperor, some feared him, some hated him. Most simply wanted the tax collectors to f**k off.

The first emperor ordered inscriptions to be carved into mountains, proclaiming that order had replaced chaos. He also ordered weapons to be confiscated, walls to be demolished, populations to be relocated, and dissent to be suppressed.

When scholars protested against his policies, the first emperor interpreted disagreement as an attempt to restore the old feudal order.

I argued with Ying Zheng more than once: "书可禁，心不可禁。/ *Books can be banned, but people's minds cannot.*"

"心不可见，书可乱政。/ *Mind is invisible, yet the written words can throw the empire into chaos.*" He looked at me coldly.

"然焚书无以同天下人心焉。/ *Yet burning books cannot bring people's minds into unity.*" I argued further.

"朕不求同心，朕求同法。/ *We do not seek the unity of minds, we seek the unity of laws.*" He stated decisively.

There was no answer that could defeat him. Ying Zheng was not ignorant, he understood the cost, and he simply believed that there was no better alternative. That was the most frightening thing about him. Ying Zheng did not commit cruelty because he lost control, he committed it because he had calculated that cruelty was useful and efficient.

Yet the same man listened when I spoke about disease. He ordered extra protection for wells near military camps, he punished officials who embezzled disaster relief supplies, he rescaled roads across the empire that allowed armies to move faster and also allowed food to reach famine regions sooner.

Emperor Ying Zheng could save ten thousand people in the morning and condemn ten thousand laborers in the afternoon. History wanted him to be either a tyrant or a hero, but he refused to be defined by such simple binarity.

The monarchic remanence completely changed emperor Ying Zheng. At first, the changes were subtle: he began drawing symbols he did not understand. They resembled the Shearynnese glyphs, except the lines overlapped in ways impossible to represent on a flat surface.

He also dreamed of distant worlds. He described towers hanging downward from the sky, oceans contained inside transparent walls, and stars arranged in geometric cages.

One night, Ying Zheng drew the *Truthful World* on a silk cloth, the Shearynn mothership that sent me to his side. Although his drawing was only vaguely similar to the exterior shape of the mothership, I was still astonished.

"陛下何处见此？ / *Where did Your Majesty see this?*" I asked him curiously.

"梦中。/ *In my dreams.*" He said.

"梦中尚见何?/ *What else did you see in your dreams?*" I asked further.

"见尔。/ *Saw you.*" He looked at me.

That answer remained in my mind for years. As the first emperor grew older, the remanence seemed to become more active. Sometimes his voice changed for a few seconds, he spoke syllables that sounded like Shearynnese, and sometimes he stared at the stars for hours.

Ying Zheng became increasingly obsessed with immortality. Court magicians and alchemists promised islands of immortals, magical herbs, and elixirs made from rare substances. Many of those contained lethal substances such as mercury, arsenic, and sulfur.

"丹砂有毒，久服伤腑，乱神，促死。/ *Cinnabar is toxic, prolonged consumption of it will damage your abdomen, disturb your spirit, and may cause sudden death.*" I warned Ying Zheng of those poisonous elixirs repeatedly.

"方士皆言可延年。/ *The alchemists all claimed that it can extend my lifespan.*" He dismissed my warning.

"方士畏陛下，故言陛下欲闻之言。/ *The alchemists fear Your Majesty, and therefore speak the words they know Your Majesty wishes to hear.*" I explained.

"尔亦畏朕乎？ / *Do you fear me as well?*" His expression darkened.

"Of course....." I almost answered him in English. Instead, I said: "臣畏陛下，然尤畏陛下早崩。/ *I stand in awe of Your Majesty, yet fears even more that Your Majesty might pass away prematurely.*"

He laughed. It was one of the last times I heard him laugh sincerely. He let out a long sigh of relief and said: "朕非畏死。朕畏死后天下复裂。/ *It is not death that we fear. We fear that the realm will once again be torn asunder after we pass away.*"

That was the truth. Ying Zheng did not desire immortality merely because he loved life, he believed the empire could not survive without him. Unfortunately, he was not entirely wrong.

In 210 BC, emperor Ying Zheng began his last and final imperial inspection tour, and his health deteriorated severely during the tour. The court attempted to conceal it, but everyone close to him knew. His skin had become pale; his hands occasionally trembled; he suffered from headaches, confusion, and sudden anger.

Mercury poisoning, exhaustion, age, illness.....perhaps all of them. I was not part of the main traveling court by then. I had spent several months near Mount Li inspecting an underground chamber constructed according to imperial instructions.

The chamber was strange even by the standards of the imperial mausoleum. Its ceiling contained a map of the heaven. Its floor contained channels intended to carry mercury, resembling the territory of his might empire. Bronze conductors were hidden inside the walls. Black stones resembling the Shearynn device were placed at twelve points around the room.

The workers believed it was a chamber for celestial rituals, but I knew better about its design. The arrangement formed a three-dimensional Shearynnese sentence, it read:

RETURN PATH PREPARED.

One night, a mounted messenger arrived at my door, carrying the first emperor's private seal. I was ordered to travel immediately.

By the time I reached the first emperor's convoy, he could barely sit upright. Zhao Gao[2] and Li Si waited outside his chamber, neither of them looked pleased to see me.

Emperor Ying Zheng ordered everyone else to leave. For the first time in twenty years, me and the first emperor were alone in the same room. He laid beneath a thin covering. The room smelled like the mixture of herbal medicine, sweat, incense, and metal.

"卿来矣。/ *My loyal subject, you've finally arrived.*" His eyes remained sharp.

"臣来迟，请陛下降罪。/ *I've arrived late, Your Majesty, please punish me.*" I greeted him humbly, like the first time I met him twenty years ago.

"朕将死，何罪可降？/ *We are about to die, how could I punish you?*" He said in a weak voice.

I knelt beside him. For years, I had known this moment would come, but simply knowing did not make it easier.

"陛下尚可还都。臣请止巡，速召医者。/ *Your Majesty can still return to the capital. I implore you to halt the tour and promptly summon the physicians.*" I console him.

[2] Also an imperial chancellor of Qin, successor of Li Si.

"勿欺朕。/ *Do not fool me.*" His voice was weak, but still commanding.

"卿知今日久矣。/ *You have long known of this day.*" The dying emperor added.

"臣知。/ *I knew.*" I lowered my head.

"卿非此世之人，朕亦知之久矣。/ *We also have long known that you do not belong to this era.*" Ying Zheng said in a weak voice.

"陛下何以知之？/ *How did Your Majesty know?*" I looked up, gazed into his eyes, and an expression of surprise appeared on my face.

"朕知尔乃后世之人，以卿初见时呼朕曰'始皇帝'也。/ *We knew you come from a later age, for you addressed me as 'Shi Huang Di'[3] when we first met.*" Emperor Ying Zheng closed his eyes briefly and whispered to me before taking his last breath.

"朕亦曾梦中见卿。/ *We also saw you in dreams.*" He opened his eyes again and continued whispering to me.

"见卿居铁车之中，天覆绿网。自千载之后而来，与异形同言。卿未至秦，朕已见卿。/ *Saw you in an armored vehicle, with green net covering the sky. Traveling from thousands of years in the future, speaking the aliens' tongue. Before you arrived at Qin, we have already met you.*" It seems that the remanence had shown him my life. Perhaps not all of it, but enough.

"故陛下从未疑臣？/ *So Your Majesty never had doubts in me?*" I wondered.

"疑。/ *Had doubts.*" Ying Zheng said.

[3]Direct translation: the first emperor.

"朕疑天下人。/ *We had doubts in everyone under the heaven.*" A faint smile appeared on his face after some coughing. That sounded like him.

He reached beneath the cover and brought a small object, it was the black "magical" stone from the day we first met.

He placed it in my hand and said: "卿佐朕二十年。韩、赵、魏、楚、燕、齐皆灭，天下合一。军中疫者少，粮道不绝，图籍益明。史未必载卿之功，朕永恩之。/ *You have served me for twenty years. The six states, Han, Zhao, Wei, Chu, Yan, and Qi have all been extinguished, and the realm is unified. Within the armies, the sick were few, supply lines remained unbroken, maps and records got ever more precise. History may not record your deeds, but we will forever hold gratitude.*"

I did not know what to say. Per my request, Ying Zheng had ordered the historians to remove my existence from all historical records for causal consistency.

"于陛下之功，臣所为甚微。/ *My deeds are insignificant comparing to yours.*" I replied humbly.

"天下之功，无微矣。/ *No deed for the sake of the realm is insignificant.*" His breath became uneven.

"朕负天下者多，然不愿负卿。/ *We have failed my subjects in many ways, yet we do not wish to fail you too.*" He said to me in tears after pausing for a long time.

Tears gathered in my eyes as well. I had never thought I would cry for the first emperor, a renowned tyrant in history. He had ordered wars, executions, forced labor, censorship, and punishments that would horrify every age after him.

He had also trusted me when nobody else would have understood what I was. He had given me a place in a world where I should not have existed. Human relationships are inconveniently complicated.

"陛下召臣，欲臣何为？/ *For what did Your Majesty summon me?*" I asked.

"骊山之下，朕已为卿留一室于陵中。朕崩后，卿入其内。石门闭，则天外之人迎卿归。/ *Beneath Mount Li, we have saved a room for you in my mausoleum. After we die, you enter that room. Once the stone gate shuts tight, they will welcome you back to beyond the heaven.*" He looked towards the west, as if he could see Mount Li through the wall.

"陛下欲臣生殉乎？/ *Does Your Majesty want me to commit martyrdom for you?*" I doubted.

"世人谓殉，朕谓归。/ *People call it martyrdom, we call it homecoming.*" He explained.

Ying Zheng continued breathing slowly. He handed me the black "magical" stone, and I held it tightly in my hands.

"臣若不从？/ *What if I disobey your orders?*" I teased him, trying to make the hood lighter in his final moments.

"朕不强卿。然卿留于此世，无家无后，终老异乡。且卿身中之物，非独属卿。/ *We won't coerce you to comply. Yet, should you remain in this era as you are, without any family or heirs, you would end your life alone in a foreign land. Besides, that which resides within you does not belong to you alone.*" His answer surprised me.

Ying Zheng continued with a request: "望卿允匠破此奇石，取其内料铸传国玉玺，以保龙脉万世不绝。/ *May we ask for your consent to let craftsmen cleave this extraordinary stone and forge an imperial*

seal with the material within, ensuring that the royal bloodline endures for all eternity." Which bloodline? I think he meant both Ying's and Shyeyain's.

"臣遵旨。陛下既知未来，可知秦之国祚乎？/ *I will meet Your Majesty's request. Since Your Majesty have foreseen the future, do you know the fate of Qin?*"

For the first time, I asked him the question he had asked me for years. He was silent for a moment, then he smiled: "天亦禁朕言。/ *The heaven forbids my spoiler words too.*"

I could not tell whether he was joking. He lifted one trembling hand. I leaned closer.

"卿归后，若见后世之人，勿尽信其所书之朕。/ *After you return, should you encounter people of later ages, we implore you not to place full trust in the accounts they write of me.*" Ying Zheng made his final request for me, then his voice weakened.

Despite everything, I laughed, and answered him with an ironic final request of mine: "臣亦请陛下勿尽信方士所献之丹。/ *I also implore Your Majesty not to place full trust in the elixirs presented by the alchemists.*"

The emperor squeezed a faint tired smile on his pale face, and sighed with grief: "哀哉，迟矣。/ *Alas, it's too late.*"

Those were the last words he spoke to me. Qin Shi Huang died before the next dawn. As usual, the court concealed his death for several days.

The imperial carriage continued westward. Orders were issued in the deceased emperor's name. Salted fish was carried near the carriage to hide the smell of his rotten body.

I knew what Zhao Gao and Li Si would do next. I knew about the forged decree. I knew Fusu and Meng Tian would die in vain. I knew the empire would collapse within a few years.

I tried to speak, but the causal barrier nearly stopped my heart. History had allowed me to help build an empire, it would not allow me to save it from falling.

Perhaps the empire's collapse was necessary for the world that eventually produced the era I was born in, or perhaps "necessary" was just another word for "too late".

I traveled with the court to Mount Li, while a group of soldiers had escorted the black "magical" stone back to Xianyang and handed it to the craftsmen of the second Qin emperor — Qin Er Shi (Ying Huhai).

It turns out that the black "magical" stone was some kind of hard drive for the monarchic remanence. The remanence leaves its host when they die, enters the "magical" stone, then finds the purest bloodline of the former host and possess them as the new host. Unfortunately, the "magical" stone is a one-of-a-kind item, it's unreplicable because it was the actual śarīra[4] of Shyeyain the Mightiest.

Qin Shi Huang's mausoleum was not yet completely sealed, but the emperor's body had arrived. Officials, guards, craftsmen, servants, and laborers filled the underground complex. Nobody questioned my presence. The imperial order concerning me had been issued earlier. I was to enter the celestial chamber alone.

The guards believed I had volunteered to accompany the emperor in death, so they gave me some water, a lamp, and food for several days.

[4]Originally refer to Buddhist relics, although in common usage it also refers to the pearl- or crystal-like bead-shaped objects that are found among the cremated ashes of spiritual masters.

That was an oddly considerate gesture for a man about to be buried alive.

At the entrance to the chamber, an elder official bowed to me: "星客辅佐先帝，功在社稷。今从先帝于地下，忠也。/ *The star guest served the late emperor and rendered distinguished service to the empire. Now, by following the late emperor into the afterlife, he demonstrates his loyalty.*"

I wanted to tell him that I was not loyal enough to die voluntarily, but I couldn't tell him that's because of the untellable truth about my "afterlife".

"请封门。/ *Please shut the gate.*" I said to the elder official in a calm voice.

"星客无悔乎？/ *Does the star guest have any regrets?*" The official raised his head and asked me one last question.

I looked into the chamber, the bronze channels reflected the lamplight. The twelve black stones stood silently around the walls. Above them, the ceiling depicted the stars.

I thought about my home, my family, tomato and egg noodles, indoor plumbing, etc.

"No." I whispered in English. Then I answered the elder official in the language of his era: "无悔。臣此行已抵群星。/ *No regrets. This journey has lead me starward.*"

I entered the chamber, the stone door began to close behind me. The sound was slow and unbearable. Workers pulled ropes outside, stone scraped against stone, and the opening narrowed from a doorway to a thin line of light, then the stone gate shut tight.

Darkness swallowed everything. For several minutes, nothing happened. I stood alone beneath a mountain, surrounded by enough earth and stone to crush a modern apartment building.

"Well, this would be a really stupid way to die." I said to myself. As my words echoed in the chamber, the channels in the floor began to glow. Mercury flowed through them, although nobody had poured it in.

The liquid metal divided into rivers, crossed beneath bronze bridges, and formed a map resembling the territory of Qin. Then the twelve stones were activated, green lines of laser beams connected them, forming the edges of an icosahedron around me.

The ceiling suddenly vanished, or perhaps it became transparent. I saw the stars, and a purple gas giant, the alien world from my visions. The twelve black stones around me dissolved into light, and the monarchic remanence awakened. Memories that did not belong to me flooded my mind.

I remembered standing on the throne of the Shearynn Empire; I remembered armies crossing dimensions; I remembered ordering the royal high priest to preserve what remained of me; I remembered choosing Earth; I remembered entering Ying Zheng; I remembered unifying ancient China.

I remembered being born again and again through a bloodline that survived wars, dynasties, famines, migrations, and even crossed oceans; I remembered being Curtis Liu; I remembered being someone else. Then the fog folks appeared beyond the green light, their message unfolded inside my mind:

ORIGIN RECOLLECTION COMPLETED,
CONTINUITY RESTORED.

The chamber disappeared, the mountain disappeared, the entire Earth disappeared. For one final instant, I saw Ying Zheng standing in the palace hall as he had appeared on the night we first met: young, alive, and ambitious. He looked at me across two millennia and whispered: "星客当归矣。/ *The star guest shall return to his origin.*"

"后世秦虽亡，然天下未亡。/ *Although Qin fell in the later ages, the realm did not.*" The heaven finally allowed me to foretell the future fate for Qin at that final instant, though Ying Zheng could never respond on it.

Then I was pulled out of history. When I opened my eyes again, I was back onboard the *Truthful World*.

"Aaaah!" I shouted as the fog folks teleported me back to the *Truthful World*. The two fog folks stood in front of me. Everything looked exactly as it had before they sent me away.

"How much time passed in the present?" This is the first thing I asked them after I returned. However, they did not answer.

Of course they did not answer, these aliens never answer the useful questions. Perhaps only a few minutes had passed for them, while I had been gone for twenty years. Interestingly, my body did not seem to age at all after living for two decades in the ancient times.

I tried to speak, but the first words that came out of my mouth were not English, Mandarin, or any human language. They were Shearynnese. And somewhere deep inside my mind, an emperor opened his eyes.

Chapter V

The Matrix

So, the first words that came out of my mouth were Shearynnese. They didn't even sound like words. Human speech is like a line: one sound after another, marching obediently through time.

However, Shearynnese comes out in layers. One part of my voice rose while another seemed to descend from somewhere behind it, and a third vibration existed only inside my skull. The sentence felt less like something I said and more like a three-dimensional object forcing its way through my throat.

The two fog folks brightened at once. Green rings unfolded around them, overlapping in the air. This time I did not need the holographic translator. Their meaning entered my mind directly:

"THE MONARCHIC REMANENCE HAS AWAKENED. HIS MAJESTY — SHYEYAIN XIX — HAS RETURNED."

"No!" I replied in English, pressing both hands against my head. "His majesty is having a major headache."

For a moment, I could remember two lives with equal clarity. I remembered learning to drive in my mother's car, and I remembered commanding vessels that had no front or back. I remembered my wedding, and I remembered a coronation beneath a purple sky. I remembered kneeling beside Ying Zheng during the last moments before he died, and I remembered the original remanence being sent across mountains to Ying Zheng's successor[1] after the first emperor had passed away.

The memories did not fit together. They overlapped like two images projected onto the same screen, except both images insisted that they were the original.

The fog folks guided me toward another room. I tried to resist, but the floor moved beneath my feet and carried me with them. It was one of the many design choices onboard the *Truthful World* that would have been impressive if it wasn't kidnapping me toward an unknown medical procedure.

The room ahead was bright enough to make the fog folks keep their distance. A white platform stood in the center, surrounded by black arches and transparent membranes. Thin streams of light moved through the walls like blood vessels. Above the platform floated a model of my brain, my nervous system, and a second network woven through both. The second network glowed purple.

"What is that?" I asked, although I already knew.

"The monarchic remanence." They answered. "Origin recollection has restored its complete pattern. Now it must be separated from the temporary host, you."

Temporary host, that's obviously me. Twenty years in Qin, several weeks of extraterrestrial harassment, one federal car chase, and a life-

[1] i.e. Qin Er Shi, as mentioned in the previous chapter.

time of unexplained chest pain had earned me the medical title of "temporary host".

"Separated how?" I asked.

The model changed. The purple network lifted out of my brain like a tree being pulled from wet soil. A second human figure appeared beside it. The network entered that figure and began to glow again.

"A new host will be located on the present-day Earth. the remanence will continue until the prophesied return of Shyeyain XIX." The fog folks answered.

"And what happens to the old host?" I continued asking with safety concern for the remanence separation procedure.

However, this time, neither of them answered. That was the most informative silence I had received from them since our first meeting.

"Show me." I requested.

The model obeyed. After the purple network left, the image of my brain remained intact, but nearly all activity faded. My body continued breathing, my heart continued beating, my eyes opened without seeing anything.

I stared at it for several seconds before I understood.

"You're going to turn me into a vegetable?!" I got angry, worried, and most of all, afraid.

"Your biological functions will be preserved." One of the fog folks said.

"That is a very scientific way to say yes." I replied sarcastically.

Originally, the remanence could have passed on by itself with the help of the black "magical" stone even when the host was unable to leave any direct descendants. However, the original black "magical" stone had been broken, and the imperial seal forged from its material was long lost in history.

Therefore, the Shearynns had to perform a remanence separation surgery on me, which would unfortunately turn me into a PVS[2].

The fog folks moved closer. The platform unfolded around my legs, forming restraints.

"The host's consciousness has become interwoven with the remanence. The separation cannot preserve both patterns, and the imperial continuity has priority." They whispered emotionlessly.

Then something cold closed around my left wrist. Suddenly, I was back in the burial chamber beneath Mount Li. The stone gate was closing, the last line of daylight was disappearing. Except this time there would be no return, no green light, no fog folks welcoming me back. My body would remain alive, imprisoned behind my own eyes, while someone else carried away everything that had made me conscious.

Before the restraint could seal tight, I struggled to pull my wrist free with all my remaining strength.

"No!!!" I yelled in riot.

"The procedure is necessary! Please cooperate!" The fog folks urged me to play along like what I did for the past twenty years in my memory.

"Then find another necessity! You alien creeps!" I argued rebelliously.

[2] Abbreviation for "Persistent Vegetative State", or more commonly known as a "vegetative patient".

The floor softened beneath my feet, trying to hold me in place. I jumped onto the edge of the platform, slipped under one of the black arches, and ran as fast as I could.

One fog folk flashed a warning behind me. A wall grew across the exit, but I reached it before it became solid. For one uncomfortable second, I passed through material that felt like cold gelatin. Then I fell into the corridor on the other side.

I had no idea where I was going. This was not unusual. During most emergencies in my life, my strategy was to move quickly first and develop a plan later.

The *Truthful World* did not have corridors in the human sense. Its interior routes rearranged themselves according to whoever used them. Openings appeared in walls, floors curved into ramps, and entire chambers rotated without warning. The fog folks floated through these changes naturally, but I didn't (couldn't).

I ran down a passage that suddenly became vertical. Gravity turned ninety degrees, and I landed face-first on what had previously been a wall.

"Ouch!" I screamed out of pain. The pain was real, which felt unfair considering that I had just spent twenty years in a borrowed historical body without aging a day.

Moments later, warning messages appeared around me:

"RETURN TO THE SEPARATION CHAMBER. RESISTANCE WILL CAUSE DISTRESS."

"A little late for that warning!" I shouted.

The monarchic remanence stirred inside me. A memory that was not mine showed me a route through the ship: three turns, a descending shaft, a circular gate, then a large hollow space near the outer hull.

I followed its guidance out of survival instinct. Perhaps Shyeyain XIX wanted to escape too, or perhaps the remanence simply objected to being handled by two medical technicians without proper imperial ceremony. I have no idea, but either reason worked for me.

Doors opened before I touched them. Security fields dimmed as I approached. Once, a swarm of small black machines[3] poured into the corridor to block me. I shouted a Shearynnese command without understanding its exact meaning, and every machine dropped to the floor.

Being possessed by a future emperor had finally provided me some practical benefits. I reached a circular gate and placed my forehead against its center. The surface recognized something inside me. It unfolded into six sections, revealing a vast chamber beyond.

It was a hangar bay! Dozens of spacecraft hung in vertical racks. Most were shaped like rings, blades, or crosses, arrangements of geometry that would have made any aircraft engineer cry.

The nearest one looked almost understandable: a dark spherical cockpit held between two broad hexagonal flat panels on its sides, similar to a TIE fighter from *Star Wars*. Of course I chose that one. If you are going to steal an alien spacecraft, you might as well steal the one whose movie reference you understood.

The cockpit opened when I approached. There was no ladder, so I climbed onto the wing panel, grabbed the rim with both hands, and pulled myself inside with the dignity of a raccoon entering a trash can.

[3] Some kind of mini drones, I guess.

The seat formed around my body. Controls rose from the floor as two ferrofluid joysticks. Rings of Shearynnese symbols appeared across the cockpit.

"Please tell me I know how to fly this." I mumbled to myself with little confidence.

Fortunately, the remanence remembered. My hands moved before I decided where to put them, and the spacecraft was successfully detached from its rack.

Somewhere behind me, the gate to space remained closed. I touched one of the ferrofluid joysticks, rotated my hand, and said a word in Shearynnese. The hangar wall became transparent and then ceased to be an obstacle at all.

The small vessel shot out of the *Truthful World*. For the first few seconds, I was too astonished to be afraid. The *Truthful World* receded behind me, a gigantic half-urchin of purple-black material, its long structures curved around bands of light, orbiting a bizarre alien planet.

I recognized the planet, it was the purple gas giant from my visions. Its name entered my mind with the remanence's memory, the Shearynns called it *Irides*[4].

The gas giant filled half the sky. Violet storms roared across its atmosphere, interrupted by silver clouds and luminous bands of turquoise. From orbit, the planet looked like ink poured into water and illuminated from below.

Just as I flew away from the *Truthful World*, green messages surrounded the cockpit:

[4] This word originally refers to the colored circular muscles in the eyes that control the size of the pupil and regulate the amount of incoming light.

"RETURN IMMEDIATELY."
"FLIGHT AUTHORIZATION REVOKED."
"THE TEMPORARY HOST IS ENDANGERING IMPERIAL CONTINUITY."

"Stop calling me temporary!" I shouted at nobody.

I pushed one of the ferrofluid joysticks forward. The little "TIE fighter" accelerated so violently that *Irides* seemed to rise up and swallow the stars.

That was when the remanence stopped helping. Perhaps the *Truthful World* had blocked its access, or perhaps ancient emperors were simply not well trained on this particular spacecraft.

Anyway, the ferrofluid joysticks changed shapes beneath my hands. My "TIE fighter" rolled, *Irides* moved from below me to above me, then to the left, and to the right, it was literally everywhere around me!

I pulled one of the joysticks backward as hard as I could, which made the "TIE fighter" accelerate. I also twisted the other joystick, which silenced every warning light for half a second and then produced many more warning lights.

"Okay, definitely not that." I said to myself.

The vessel began falling towards the purple gas giant. There was no surface below, only layers of atmosphere thick enough to crush metals. Purple lightning stretched across storms larger than continents on Earth. The cockpit calculated my descent with a glowing line ending deep inside the planet.

Irides grew brighter. The first traces of its upper atmosphere struck the vessel. Fire crawled across the side panels.

I tried every command I could remember. Some activated weapons, some changed the seat temperature, and one caused a pleasant tone to play while I continued falling towards certain death.

Then a blue world crossed between me and *Irides*. At first, I thought it was another vision since it really looked like the Earth. It moved too fast, expanding from a bright disk into an ocean-colored moon surrounded by white clouds.

The vessel's course was bent by the Earth-like blue moon. The fatal line into *Irides* vanished, replaced by a spiral around the smaller ocean-covered world. Its gravity had captured me.

"*Elysian*!" The remanence identified it. It was the Shearynn homeworld, a large moon orbiting *Irides*, with an environment similar to that of the Earth. The name *Elysian* meant something like "of Elysium" or "belonging to paradise".

Well, paradise better have airbags. I had my fingers crossed, hoping for a successful crash landing. The spacecraft entered the atmosphere sideways.

What followed was less of a landing and more of a prolonged disagreement between the vessel and the ground. Clouds struck the cockpit. Blue sky, dark water, green land, and violet planet spun around me. The side panels tore through the air like broken sails.

A city appeared in the distance. Towers rose near the coast, silver and white, with suspended roads curving between them. A broad river divided the city from a wetland on my side. A cable-stayed bridge crossed the river near its estuary[5].

[5]The fancy word (technical term) for a river mouth where fresh water meets the salty sea tide.

My "TIE fighter" passed over the bridge, missed one of its pylons by an amount I would describe as "not enough", and crashed into the mudflats beyond.

The first impact tore away one side panel. The second buried the cockpit halfway into wet soil. The vessel slid across reeds, bounced over a shallow channel, rotated several times, and finally stopped with its remaining panel pointing toward the sky.

For a while, I hung upside down inside the seat. Nothing moved.

"Am I dead?" I asked.

No one answered, which was inconclusive. The seat released me, I fell onto the ceiling and confirmed that at least my sense of pain remained alive.

The cockpit opened with a tired mechanical sound. Warm air entered. It smelled of salt, wet soil, plants, and something faintly fishy. I climbed out through the tilted opening and dropped knee-deep into mud.

Blue sky stretched above me. White clouds moved in a familiar wind. Reeds bent along the channels. Birds — or alien creatures that had independently evolved the same general design as birds — circled above the river.

For one irrational moment, I thought I had returned to Earth. Then I turned around, looked up, and *Irides* occupied a quarter of the sky.

Its purple bands curved above the horizon, so enormous that my mind refused to interpret them as part of a planet. A thin silver ring cut across the upper atmosphere. The sight was beautiful in a way that made me feel very small and very far from home.

Suddenly, I heard something moved behind the reeds. At first, I saw only a ridge of wet dark skin. Then a head rose from a nest of mud and woven plants. It had a broad flat skull, lidless golden eyes, and six feathery structures around its neck. Its front limbs pushed against the ground, each foot larger than my entire body.

It was a giant alien salamander approximately the size of a humpback whale!

More heads rose around it. The mudflat was not empty, it was a nesting ground. Dozens of gigantic salamander-like animals laid between the channels, guarding clusters of leathery eggs. Some salamanders rested half-submerged in the river, others returned from the water carrying fishlike creatures in their mouths. These salamanders behaved somewhat like penguins, if penguins weighed thirty tons and could swallow a car.

I slowly stepped away from the crashed spacecraft. One of the nearest salamanders raised its head and produced a deep coughing roar, then two more responded. The feathery structures on their necks stretched open, revealing bright orange membranes and fire-like patterns.

"Alright, calm down, I'm just leaving." I said, holding up both hands. "Not interested in your eggs. I.....I don't even eat caviar." Although that's mostly because I can't afford them.

The first male charged. Running through mud is already pretty difficult. However, running through mud after a crash landing while being pursued by three angry whale-sized amphibians is even more difficult.

Their bodies rolled from side to side, but they moved terrifyingly fast. Each step drove water out of the muddy land. One snapped at the end of my clothes and tore away a strip of fabric.

I ran toward a metal fence separating the wetland from a road. Signs floated above it in Shearynnese:

"PROTECTED BREEDING RESERVE. HIGH-VOLTAGE DETERRENT. DO NOT CROSS."

The last two instructions were not useful in my situation. I climbed the metal fence anyways, because I had to. As a result, the electrified fence threw me the rest of the way.

White light filled my vision, and every muscle in my body contracted at once. I landed on the road, shook violently for several seconds, and smelled something burning. It was probably part of my clothes.

Vehicles passed around me at high speed. They had no wheels, only flat bodies hovering above the roadway. None of them stopped, although several changed lanes with perfect precision to avoid turning me into a thin historical artifact.

I rolled toward the shoulder and forced myself upright. My legs trembled. Each step arrived half a second later than I expected, as if the electricity had disrupted communication between me and my own knees.

Across the river stood the city. If intelligent beings lived anywhere nearby, they lived there. The bridge was my only visible route to the city, if I don't plan to swim across the river filled with giant salamanders.

I staggered toward the cable-stayed bridge. The bridge looked like human-built from a distance, but it had not been designed for pedestrians. Six lanes of silent vehicles passed in each direction, separated by glowing barriers. There was no sidewalk, no emergency shoulder, and no place where a confused primate from Earth could walk safely.

The only accessible path was a narrow maintenance track running along one of the diagonal cables. Without a better choice, I climbed onto it. Back on Earth, I once climbed the Sydney Harbour Bridge in Australia when I was a teenager. However, climbing this bridge felt largely different.

Below me, the river widened toward the sea. The mudflats spread along the river bank on my side, covered by salamander nests. Beyond them lay forests with silver-green leaves. On the opposite bank, the city reflected the late afternoon light. Tall buildings rose above the skyline, curved upward and joined one another like like tree canopies.

I kept climbing towards the bridge pylon. By the time I reached the top of the bridge pylon, the sun had begun to sink behind the city. *Irides* darkened above it, turning from violet to deep indigo. My legs shook due to exhaustion, crash landing injury, and residual electricity from the metal fence. I sat on the narrow platform and tried not to look down.

That was when I heard the song. It began below the threshold of hearing, more like a pressure in my chest rather than a sound. Then it got louder, the bridge cables vibrated, the river surface formed long circular waves. The note rose into a deep call resembling whale song on Earth, except it carried through the steel, the air, and my bones at the same time.

The whale-sized salamanders in the mudflat lifted their heads as something immense arrived at the estuary through the river from inland. Its head alone was as large as a house, its body stretched nearly the length of a modern destroyer, occupying almost half of the river channel.

This ultra-gigantic warship-sized creature is presumably the salamander queen. I did not know how I knew her title. Perhaps the remanence

recognized her, or perhaps every species recognizes royalty when it sees an animal large enough to block a river.

Flame-colored patterns covered the salamander queen's dark green skin, glowing beneath the water like molten veins. A forest of dark fins ran along her back. Around her swam dozens of the whale-sized "worker salamanders", which suddenly looked like children in comparison to their queen.

The water rose against both banks as she passed beneath the bridge. Vehicles continued moving overhead as if an amphibian the size of a warship were an ordinary part of the evening commute.

The salamander queen stood up when she reached the sea. Her front limbs pushed against the shallow seabed, lifting her chest above the surface. Water poured from her body in waterfalls.

Next, out of a sudden, she turned her head towards the bridge pylon, where I stood still due to tonic immobility. She moved closer and stared at me with one of her enormous golden eyes in the size of a car. Her eye filled my view, her pupil narrowed, while I gripped the maintenance rail and stopped breathing for a moment.

She did not open her mouth, nor did she commence attack. She could have just eaten me like swallowing a small bean, but she didn't.

A thought entered my mind with a strange voice, sounded gentle and impossibly old: "*Little sovereign, why are you walking up here?*"

"Excuse me?" I whispered in English.

"*Ride.*" She conveyed her thoughts to me telepathically as her eye blinked.

The salamander queen lowered her head beside the bridge pylon. A row of ridges along her skull formed something almost like steps.

I had already followed aliens into a time machine, served Qin Shi Huang for twenty years, escaped from an unauthorized brain surgery, stolen an alien spacecraft, survived a crash landing on an alien world, and been chased by whale-sized salamanders. At some level, refusing the giant telepathic amphibian would have been the irrational decision.

"So why the heck not? Let's ride the salamander queen!" I said to myself in my mind.

I climbed onto her slippery but bumpy head. Her skin was warm, smooth, and lubricating, patterned with lines that glowed beneath me. I settled between two ridges and wrapped my arms around myself for safety.

"Please don't dive. Please don't dive. Please don't dive." I pray in my heart.

Good news: she did not dive. Bad news: she took off instead. Water spiraled beneath her huge body. The salamander queen lifted off from the sea without wings, without engines, and without any concern for the rules of aerodynamics. The smaller salamanders rose behind her in formation. Their bodies moved through the air as naturally as they had moved through water.

We ascended above the Elysian sky, the city spread beneath us, and the sea turned gold beneath the setting sun. For a few seconds, despite everything, I forgot to be afraid.

Then, out of a sudden, the sky was filled with spaceships. They appeared beyond the clouds in disciplined ranks, hundreds of dark vessels descending from orbit. Some were long and angular, others carried ro-

tating habitats and weapon platforms. The light of the sunset burned along their hulls.

On the side of these vessels, white letters of "UNSC" were printed in Roman/Latin alphabet, which stands for "United Nations Space Command".

The monarchic remanence reacted with terror. Not my terror. An older fear, inherited from a future (five centuries from now) that had not happened yet.

This was the war that the Shearynn high priest had foreseen. The vessels above Elysian were human fleets. The Shearynn Empire was on the brink of total collapse, humans would have driven the Shearynn race to total extinction according to the prophecy. And now Shyeyain XIX returns through me to lead their defense against the human invasion.

The salamander queen's flame-colored patterns brightened. The worker salamanders around her stretched the feathery structures on their necks, and energy gathered among them.

They were not wildlife, they were weapons. The Shearynns had looked at those interstellar warships and decided that the reasonable countermeasure was to breed larger salamanders.

Ahead of us, the human fleet turned. Weapon ports opened along the leading vessels.

The salamander queen called through my mind: "*Command us, little sovereign.*"

Something inside me rose to answer. At that exact moment, a green icosahedron laser-beam array formed around my body.

"Oh, come on!" I shouted out loud in frustration.

Suddenly, the salamander queen, the bridge, the sunset, the alien city, and the human fleet vanished. Within a blink of an eye, I was pulled out of the sky and returned to the *Truthful World*. The evil fog folks just teleported me back to their mothership again, at such a critical moment!

Chapter VI

Inception

I landed on the floor of the separation chamber. The two fog folks waited beside the white platform. More had gathered behind them, filling the room with layers of drifting gray and green lights.

The restraints were still active. The model of my empty-eyed body still floated above the platform. I crawled backward until my shoulders touched the wall.

"Don't! Please." I begged them.

For the first time since I met them, the fog folks did not answer with a command, an explanation, or another sentence that treated my consciousness as inconvenient packaging.

They looked at me. I could not read expressions on clouds of interdimensional vapor, but their lights had changed. The rapid flashes disappeared. A slow blue glow moved through them, one after another.

"You are afraid." They said.

"Excellent observation. Why don't you put it in the medical report." My voice broke and my body trembled as I replied them sarcastically.

One of them dimmed the model above the platform. The image of my vegetative body vanished.

"The host has endured twenty subjective years in service of imperial continuity. The host retains attachments on the Earth and humans. These costs were not properly measured."

"You didn't think twenty years would matter?!" I inquired with with anger in my voice.

"The remanence was expected to dominate your consciousness during origin recollection." They argued.

"Well, it didn't! I lived every second of those years!" I complained out loud.

I remembered the smell of Xianyang after rain. I remembered the supply ledgers, the army camps, the palace corridors, Ying Zheng's laughter, and the sound of the stone gate closing beneath Mount Li.

To the fog folks, the ritual might have been just a transfer of data. To me, it had been most of my adult life. The gathered fog folks exchanged pulses of light. A three-dimensional sentence formed above them: "Negotiation is permitted."

"You could negotiate this whole time?! " I stared at the words and asked in surprise.

"Negotiation was not previously necessary." They claimed so. Unbelievable!

The room changed around us. The medical platform sank into the floor. A surface rose behind me and shaped itself into something re-

sembling a chair. Another appeared across a desk from me, although none of the fog folks sat on it. Perhaps they had generated it because human negotiations looked incomplete without furniture.

Terms unfolded in the air between us. They offered to return me to the present-day Earth. I could keep my body, my consciousness, and the monarchic remanence for the rest of my natural lifespan. Whenever I approach death, the Shearynns would retrieve me, separate the remanence during my final moments, and place it inside a new suitable host.

In exchange, I have to swear allegiance to the Shearynn Empire and obey several conditions.

"What happens if I reject these terms?" I asked. Then the white platform rose halfway out of the floor.

"Right. Negotiation. I understand." I added, since they were somehow threatening me. It was already the best offer I could get from them.

The first condition was *absolute secrecy*. I could never tell any human being what had happened onboard the *Truthful World*, what I had experienced in ancient Qin, what I had seen on Elysian, or what agreement I had made with the Shearynns.

The second condition was *supervision*. Shearynn undercover operatives in human society would monitor me for the remainder of my life.

"You have undercover agents on Earth?" I doubted.

The hologram showed a few faces for example. Government employees, engineers, doctors, military officers, media workers, and ordinary people appeared one after another. Some I recognized from news broadcasts, most I did not.

Then my wife's face appeared. I stopped breathing. The image showed her standing inside our kitchen. Another showed her at the airport before her supposed business trip. In the third, green Shearynnese glyphs reflected across her eyes.

"No." I sighed in utter shock.

"The operative assigned as your spouse has maintained observation for eight earth years." The fog folks explained.

"Assigned? Eight years? That's before we met!" I exclaimed in awe.

"The relationship was established to monitor early remanence activity." The fog folks explained further.

"She married me because you told her to?" I stood up so quickly that the chair dissolved behind me.

"Her initial approach was an assignment. Subsequent emotional attachment was not required, but appears to have developed." I guess they were trying to be considerate of my feelings. That was supposed to comfort me, but it did not.

Every memory of my marriage was recalled for inspection: our first date, the day she agreed to marry me, the nights she stayed beside me when the chest pain returned, the way she looked at me after the alien message appeared on live TV, and the tears at the airport when I sent her to my parents.

I could no longer tell which moments had belonged to my wife and which had belonged to an alien undercover operative performing her role.

"Does she even love me?" I asked them in tears.

"Yes." They answered.

"Did you order her to do that?" I asked them further. However, this time, the fog folks remained silent.

The third condition was *enforcement*. Should I commit a major violation of the previous terms, the Shearynns will retrieve me immediately. The original separation procedure would then be performed, and my biological body would survive without consciousness.

A legal definition of "major violation" unfolded in Shearynnese. It was extremely long. Apparently, these aliens have also became obsessed with paperwork after building their empire.

The fourth condition was the most eerie. I was required to speak publicly against the Shearynns.

"Say that again?" I was utterly confused.

"You will promote distrust and hatred of the Shearynns. You will advocate Earth supremacy and human supremacy. Our operatives will provide appropriate means and necessary assistance." The fog folks explained.

"You want me to help you by convincing everyone to hate you?!" I was still confused.

"Correct." They answered affirmatively.

The fog folks displayed a model of human public opinion. In one simulation, respectable authorities praised the Shearynns, and suspicion toward them increased. In another, an unstable public figure shouted exaggerated warnings about alien conspiracies, and support for peaceful relations increased.

My face appeared on the unstable public figure.

"Your species exhibits persistent opposition to direct instruction." The fog folks stated.

"When being ordered to trust, humans distrust. When being ordered to fear, humans investigate. When an unreliable speaker advocates hostility, moderate observers move toward acceptance." The fog folks added.

"So your diplomatic strategy is reverse psychology?" I questioned.

"The term is incomplete, but acceptable." They compromised, so did I.

Their plan was insulting, yet it was also not entirely wrong. They believed the future war might be prevented if humanity retained a favorable view of the Shearynns.

Since direct praise from an alien empire could trigger fear and resistance, they wanted me to play the ridiculous extremist. The louder I preached human supremacy, the more reasonable people would reject my rhetoric. In theory, I would spend the rest of my life protecting the Shearynns by pretending to hate them.

"And if this doesn't stop the war?" I asked in fear of the potential consequences.

The room filled with the image of Elysian beneath the human fleet. The salamander queen rose from the sea. Cities burned along the coast. Above them, a throne of black material waited for Shyeyain XIX.

"Then the remanence must survive." They stated decisively.

The agreement hovered in front of me. I thought about Earth. I thought about my parents, who still believed I had gone missing after being taken by government agents. I thought about my wife, who-

ever she really is. I thought about being trapped inside a living body for decades while the Shearynns carried away the emperor in my subconscious.

"If I accept, I go home now?" I asked in hope of a swift return to the Earth.

"Yes." The fog folks assured me.

"No surgery until I'm near death?" I asked further.

"Yes." They assured me once more.

"And you would leave my family alone?" I wanted even more assurance.

"So long as the agreement is observed." The fog folks said.

"That is not the same answer." I was a bit disappointed, but I got no better choice. They did not respond.

I placed my hand into the center of the hologram. The monarchic remanence translated my intention into a Shearynn oath. Rings of glyphs enclosed my arm and entered my skin without pain.

I swore allegiance to the Shearynn Empire. At least officially.

The *Truthful World* returned to the low-Earth orbit. To everyone on the surface, the Shearynn mothership reappeared in the exact position from which it had vanished.

According to the clocks of the International Space Station, less than an hour had passed. According to me, the Qin dynasty had risen, unified ancient China, and begun to collapse.

The Shearynns sent a message to the United Nations in several human languages with my help in translation. They claimed that the monar-

chic remanence had been completely removed from my body and that I no longer possess any alienative feature that distinguishes me from other humans.

The fog folks described the visit as a private cultural and medical matter, expressed regret for the "temporary interruption" of my life, and requested that no further contact be attempted.

Then they teleported me back to a highly classified location on Earth that the Shearynns and the United Nations have agreed upon. I was immediately taken to a secured medical facility.

Human doctors examined everything they were legally and physically capable of examining. They scanned my brain, checked my blood, my organs, my bones, and several other regions that I do not wish to describe.

The tests found nothing unusual. The monarchic remanence remained invisible.

I spent six weeks in isolation at the secured medical facility while committees argued over whether I was myself, an alien imitation, a biological weapon, or a diplomatic package nobody wanted to open.

Eventually, the United Nations and the governments involved accepted the Shearynn explanation. I was not allowed to read the classified reports, but I was allowed to return to human society.

My wife waited for me outside the facility. She ran toward me and wrapped both arms around my body. Cameras flashed, officials smiled for the public. She buried her face against my shoulder and cried.

I held her because the cameras expected me to, and because some part of me still wanted to.

"I thought I lost you." She whispered.

"Really? Did you?" I asked in doubt of her true identity.

She pulled away just enough to look at me. For an instant, something passed through her expression. Fear, guilt, recognition — perhaps all of those. Then she kissed me and played the role of a relieved wife perfectly.

I never confronted her directly about what the Shearynns told me of her. Perhaps because the agreement forbade it, perhaps I still loved her, or perhaps — as emperor Ying Zheng taught me — "勿尽信他人之所言。/ *Do not place full trust in the accounts of others.*". Although Ying Zheng never said that quote word by word, he showed me so in action.

Every time I considered writing down the truth, the memory of the white platform returned. In the end, I always strictly followed the agreements I signed.

At interviews, I described the Shearynns as manipulative parasites. On live broadcasts, I warned that humanity should never trust beings who could enter our minds. I even quoted an ancient Chinese saying to make my point: "非我族类，其心必异。/ *Those who are not of our kind will inevitably harbor ill intentions.*"

I called for space agencies to strengthen their near-Earth defenses. I argued that no extraterrestrial race had the right to interfere in human affairs or minds.

Commentators called me traumatized, unstable, xenophobic, heroic, fraudulent, courageous, and insane. Public sympathy toward the Shearynns increased almost exactly as their model predicted.

The more I hated them in public, the more the public defended them. The only problem was that I was no longer pretending.

The Shearynns had taken my life apart and returned it with conditions. They had forced me to spend twenty years in a distant past, threatened to erase my consciousness, and revealed that my marriage began as a surveillance assignment.

They offered no compensation, no apology that understood what had been done, and no real freedom. My hatred became the first thing onboard the *Truthful World* that truly belonged to me.

Several months after my release, I received an invitation to address the United Nations General Assembly. I guess it was secretly arranged by the Shearynn undercover agents.

The speech would be broadcast worldwide. Officially, I would recount humanity's first close encounter with the Shearynns and call for vigilance without war. Unofficially, the speech was the most important performance in the Shearynns' propaganda plan.

My wife delivered the final text to me. "Please read after it exactly." She said.

We stood in a hotel room overlooking the East River in New York City. She had only aged a few weeks since I last saw her, but I had aged twenty years where nobody could see.

"Is that a request from my wife or an order from my supervisor?" I asked her. Her face went pale. The room became completely silent.

I had not directly revealed anything. Technically, she could have interpreted the sentence as a bitter joke. We both knew it was not.

"Curtis, I'm sorry." She whispered to me. That was the first honest answer I received from her after coming home.

I wanted to ask whether she had ever been human. I wanted to ask whether our relationship meant anything for her. I wanted to tell her about Ying Zheng, Elysian, the salamander queen, and the surgery waiting at the end of my life.

Instead, I picked up the speech. "Don't worry, I'll follow the script." I said.

The next afternoon, I stood before the podium at the General Assembly Hall of United Nations. Delegates filled the hall, rows of translators sat behind the glass, cameras from every major network faced the podium. Beyond the walls, millions — maybe even billions — watched the live broadcast on TV and the internet.

My wife sat with the invited guests near the front row. Several other Shearynn operatives were positioned around the hall. Once I knew what to look for, they were easy to recognize. They watched me too carefully.

I began reading the script. I spoke about fear, sovereignty, and the danger of allowing a technologically superior species to define humanity's future. I condemned the Shearynns for abducting me. I praised human dignity. I repeated the phrases the Shearynn operatives had designed to sound extreme enough that reasonable listeners would reject them.

The speech went very well. That was unfortunate for its authors. As I approached the final page, my hands stopped trembling. For the first time since the green lines found me in my backyard, I knew exactly what I was going to do.

The approved conclusion appeared on the teleprompter. I read the sentence, but not exactly following the script. Instead, I modified it a little bit and said aloud: "Let our encounter with the aliens become not a cause for hatred, but a reminder that humanity must meet the unknown with unity, caution, and peace."

Then I looked away from the teleprompter, and added a conclusion of my own: "So today, on behalf of the planet Earth and all mankind, I declare revenge on the Shearynn Empire."

After finishing my speech, I bit down on the poison capsule that I previously hid inside my mouth during a shower in the hotel room. The shell broke between my teeth, a bitter taste rapidly spread across my tongue, my chest tightened hard, and I lost my consciousness almost immediately.

Within seconds, my legs cramped, white foam filled my mouth. The ceiling lights stretched into long thin lines. The entire world faded away and disappeared from my sight.

My wife stood up, shouting erupted across the hall, and the Shearynn operatives immediately rushed towards me as I fell on the floor with white foams spilled out from my mouth.

My wife reached the podium first, two Shearynn operatives followed her. Security officers moved to intercept my wife, while the Shearynn operatives disguised as medical personnel rushed from the side of the hall.

The Shearynn operatives disguised as medical personnel pressed their hands against my chest. Someone shouted for an antidote.

My wife leaned over me, her face breaking apart in panic. "Curtis, stay with me!" She shouted my name. Perhaps she still loves me, but that might be the worst part of all.

The Shearynns had spent years monitoring my mind. They had controlled my speeches, my live, my future, and the conditions of my death. Somehow they had forgotten that humans are, in their own words, persistently disobedient.

The monarchic remanence burned in my subconscious. I felt centuries of memory collapsing: Shyeyain the Mightiest, Ying Zheng, the bloodline between us, the future emperor Shyeyai XIX who had not yet been born.

The *Truthful World* attempted to lock onto my body. Green lights flickered across my corpse lying before the great emblem of the United Nations. Unfortunately for the Shearynns, it was too late.

My heart had stopped, and the monarchic remanence died with me. However, death did not end my story. Instead, it became a sequence of scenes I watched without eyes.

Security officers arrested the individuals who had operated on my body with technology that no human medical team possessed. Under interrogation, the Shearynn operatives revealed that the remanence had never been removed. They revealed the agreement I signed, the prophesied future war against humans, the twenty years I spent in ancient China, and the purpose of Shyeyain XIX.

The statement the Shearynns had delivered when they returned me to the Earth had been a deception. My public hostility had been part of their strategy. My death had not been an act of madness, as the first reports claimed, but a deliberate decision to destroy the only force that the Shearynn high priest believed could defeat mankind in the future invasion.

The world changed its judgment of me very quickly. Death is excellent for public relations. The United Nations lowered its flags to half-mast. My body laid in state beneath the blue-and-white emblem of the planet I had chosen.

A state funeral was held for me. Delegations from countries that had previously argued over which government had jurisdiction over me now competed to praise my sacrifice.

The Nobel Committee made an unprecedented exception and awarded me the Nobel Peace Prize posthumously. I found that decision slightly confusing. I had declared revenge in a room built for diplomacy, committed suicide during a live broadcast, and possibly guaranteed a future interstellar war. Apparently, peace is complicated.

The *Truthful World* recalled the remaining Shearynn operatives from the Earth, and my wife was among them. I saw her one last time through the bizarre montage after my death, standing beneath the purple lights of the Shearynn mothership as the Earth disappeared behind her.

Whether humans eventually invaded Elysian or not, or for whatever reason in the case they did, the prophecy had been broken. No Shyeyain XIX would rise from the monarchic remanence to save the Shearynn Empire from the brink of collapse. No future emperor would sit upon the black throne and preserve the Shearynn species from total extinction.

The Shearynn Empire would face its final war without the savior promised by its high priest. **The stellaris mightiest had reached its grand finale.**

The scenes faded, darkness followed, then I heard a machine beeping. It was a small, repetitive sound, annoyingly patient. Not an imperial bell, not a Shearynn warning, not the song of a giant salamander. Just a medical monitor performing its tedious job.

I tried to open my eyes. Nothing happened.

I tried again. Light entered through a narrow line. Shapes moved above me. The world was blurred and painfully bright. I heard someone gasp, then a chair scraped against the floor.

"He's awake! He opened his eyes!" Someone next to me screamed out loud.

The voice belonged to an old woman. She leaned over me. Her hair was gray, her face thinner and covered with lines, but I recognized her immediately.

"妈? / Mom?" I tried to speak in my native tongue. However, the word did not come out. A breathing tube occupied my throat. I could only make a weak sound and move one finger.

My mother grabbed my hand with both of hers and began crying. Other people entered the room. Doctors checked my pupils, shouted instructions, and examined the monitors.

Behind them stood my father, much older than the man I remembered. Beside him stood my wife. Her face was the same face I had watched above the podium at the General Assembly Hall of United Nations, except age had touched her too.

I panicked. As a result, the monitor showed that my heart accelerated. I tried to pull the tubes away from my body. Nurses held my arms while a doctor told me I was safe.

It took several days before I could breathe without the machine and several more before I could speak clearly. My muscles had forgotten almost everything. Lifting a cup required more concentration than flying the stolen Shearynn spacecraft.

When my wife sat beside me alone, I finally asked the question that had remained in my mind since I woke up: "Are you still one of them?"

"One of who?" She stared at me, she looked puzzled.

"The Shearynns." I said.

She began to cry and laugh at the same time: "Who? I don't even know what that word means." This time, I believed her.

The doctors explained the real story slowly:

> *Twenty years ago, I had been a passenger on an airplane involved in a catastrophic crash. I survived, but severe brain injury left me in a persistent vegetative state.*
>
> *My heart continued beating, my eyes opened and closed, and my body responded to some stimuli, but I never showed reliable evidence of consciousness. Machines have supported my breathing and nutrition since then.*

The ordinary details from the weeks before the crash had been real. My work, my home, my parents, my wife, the unfinished science-fiction novel on my computer — all of them had existed. My mind had taken those memories and built a world around them.

The aliens had never arrived. The men in black had never chased me down the highway. The *Truthful World* had never appeared on the low-Earth orbit. I had never met Ying Zheng, never crossed two thousand years of time, never stood above Elysian on the head of a flying salamander.

I had dreamed all of it. The twenty years I believed I had spent in Qin were the twenty years my body had survived unconsciously with the help of machines and medicine.

The dream had sustained itself for so long that I could no longer wake up from it. My brain absorbed sounds from the hospital, fragments of conversations, television programs, old memories, and perhaps even the pressure of my family's hands, transforming everything into monarchic remanences, telepathic aliens, causal barriers, and imperial rituals.

Eventually, money began to run out, insurance appeals failed. My parents had spent much of their savings. My wife had placed most of her adult life on hold.

After twenty years, my family began discussing whether continued life support was still helping me or merely preserving the shape of hope. That was when a research group contacted them.

The research group was testing an experimental procedure they called "Dream-Building Therapy". Their theory was that some patients diagnosed as vegetative were not entirely unconscious. Instead, their minds might be trapped inside extremely deep, self-sustaining dream states, unable to recognize external signals as a reason to wake up.

The treatment mapped faint neural responses, reconstructed elements of the patient's internal dreamworld, and inserted guided sensory patterns into the dream. The researchers could not control every detail. They could only enter the existing story, build new scenes from its plots and setups, then push the dream toward an irreversible ending, toward the dreamer's death[1].

If the conscious self became completely convinced that it had died, the researchers believed the brain might abandon the constructed world and return to sensory reality, and hence waking up the patient in the real world.

Elysian had been their work. So had the salamander queen, the negotiation, the false return to Earth, the speech at the United Nations, and the poison capsule hidden in my mouth.

They did not force me to choose suicide. Instead, they constructed a story in which I would willingly choose an ending stronger than the dream's instinct to continue.

[1]Not physical death, just dream death.

They gave me a reason to die so that I could wake up. Apparently, it worked.

My family looked exactly as they were in my dream because the dream had borrowed their faces from my memory, except that their faces are older now.

My parents had become elderly while I served an emperor who had been dead for more than two thousand years. My wife had waited through a marriage in which I had been absent even while lying in front of her.

I had lost twenty years, so had they.

Recovery was slow. I had to learn how to sit, stand, eat, and walk again. My legs trembled during the first steps, just as they had after I climbed the electrified fence on Elysian. The therapists called that similarity a coincidence. I did not argue.

One afternoon, my family took me outside in a wheelchair. The sky was blue. There were no green lines above it, no purple gas giant occupying the horizon, and no alien mothership waiting beyond the clouds.

My mother sat beside me. My father complained about the hospital parking fees. My wife held my hand. They were older, exhausted, but real.

I had crossed empires, centuries, planets, and dreams to return to them. I had died in front of the whole world. And for the first time in twenty years, I was truly alive.

After I discharged from the hospital and went home, I wrote "星客已归。/ *The star guest has returned to his origin.*" at the end of my science-fiction novel as the finishing touch.

Did you really think there would be Chapter 7?

Well, there isn't one.

The story had already ended in Chapter 6. This page is only included because I like the number 7. Siuuuuu!

Yes, I do watch a lot of movies, especially science fiction movies.

From here on, I have no deeper explanation on this fake chapter. And after six chapters of aliens, emperors, lizard people, and time travel, I'm surprised you still expect another one.

Thank you for reading. I hope you had a good one.

You may now return to your own timeline, if it's still there.

THE END

Author's Note

This story began with a vivid dream on April 7, 2026: an alien message in an impossible language, a modern man carrying the remanence of an emperor, ancient history seen through contemporary eyes, and an escape that required the dreamer to die. Writing the novel was my attempt to discover the story connecting those images.

At its center is a question about the ownership of the self. Curtis is defined by others as a host, an emperor, an ancestor, an ambassador, and a threat. His struggle is not only to survive, but to decide whether an identity imposed upon him deserves his obedience.

The novel also explores how civilizations use stories about the past to shape the future. Empires, governments, religions, and families create narratives that may preserve truth, provide meaning, or become dangerous through belief.

The historical characters and settings have been deliberately fictionalized. The Shearynns, Shearynnese, the monarchic remanence, entropic dynamics, and the interdimensional history belong entirely to the fictional world of this novel. I hope Curtis's journey leaves readers with at least one question worth carrying back into the waking world.

Acknowledgment

I would like to send my sincere gratitude to my mother *Jingxia Liu* for the support she provided me during the writing of this story.

Also, thank you (*all readers*) so much for reading this fictional narrative of mine, no matter how much of it you've made through.

I realize that I am an undertrained and inexperienced writer. Nevertheless, I've tried my best to output the many ideas in my head in textual format. Again, as stated in the copyright page, please feel free to email me at twu0261@gmail.com if you have any any questions and/or suggestions regarding this book.

Sincerely
Tian Wu
July 2026

Appendix

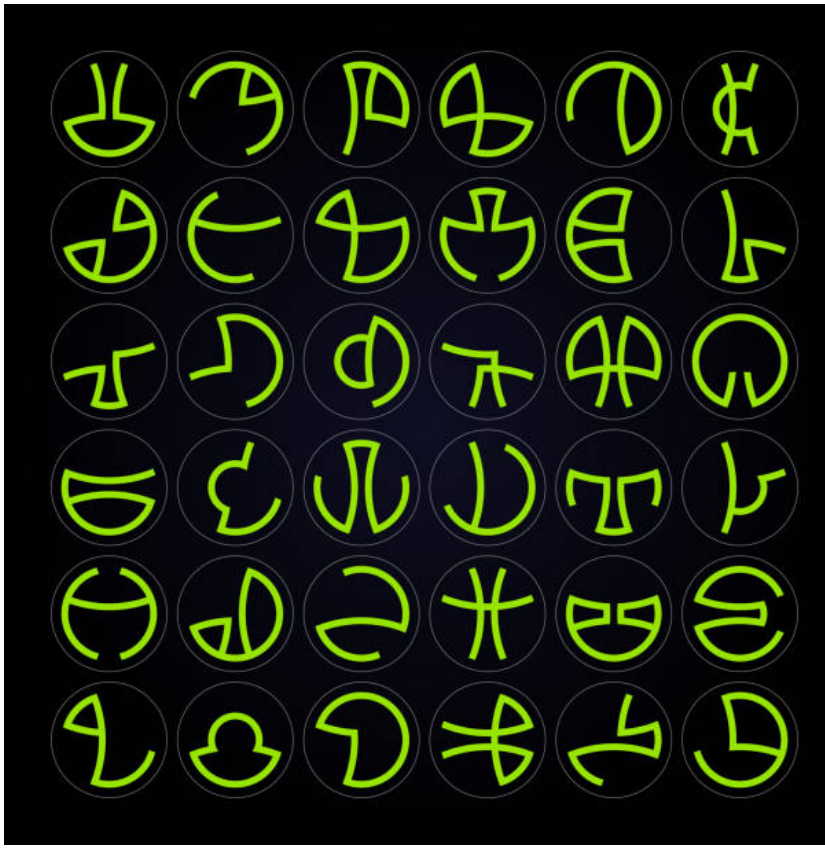

Figure VI.1: The table of Shearynnese glyphs.